

A/N: This is book four of the Alexandra Quick series. The first three books are, in order, Alexandra Quick and the Thorn Circle, Alexandra Quick and the Lands Below, and Alexandra Quick and the Deathly Regiment. I recommend reading them in order, as this story contains spoilers and references to events in previous books.

This is not a WIP: I have written the complete novel. New chapters will be posted every Monday and Friday.

I do not usually reply to individual reviews, but rest assured, I do read and appreciate every one! I will also do my best to answer questions. Feel free to visit me at my LiveJournal (lj username: inverarity), where you can talk to me about my fan fiction, my book reviews, or anything else that strikes your fancy.

Many thanks are owed to my beta readers, TealTerror and SwissMarg, who are responsible for all the improvements between the first draft and this one. For anything you don't like, the blame is all mine.

Ghosts of Roanoke

The pirate fleet appeared suddenly, emerging from the thick fog bank that blanketed the small stretch of coastline. Only half an hour earlier, the weather had been clear enough to see the trees on the island across the sound. Now, from the vantage point of a long, high pier, the people on the beach were wraiths shrouded in mist, and the pirate ships were hulking shadows bearing down on them without warning.

At the end of the pier, where it thrust out over the water, stood a tall boy with short red hair fringed by a few unruly curls, and a girl with straight black hair falling just to her shoulders. The two teenagers wore robes like everyone else on the beach and the pier, but theirs were plain and loose, thrown over the clothes they wore underneath. The boy's robes flapped open as he waved his arms at the pirate ships, revealing blue jeans and a striped polo shirt.

"Awesome!" he said, as people began screaming. The pirate ships did not run aground. Instead, the phantasmal vessels plowed unimpeded right through the sand and directly over the people on the beach. Some of the spectators scattered in alarm, but most just stood there transfixed.

The teenagers found themselves looking right down the barrels of a row of cannons as one of the ships drifted past the pier. Pirates leered and waved swords and pistols, and then the cannons fired. The pea soup fog swallowed the booms and the billowing smoke, so the teens didn't realize they had been fired upon until a ghostly gray shape came hurtling directly at them.

"Holy crap!" said the boy, and he grabbed the girl, much to her consternation, and threw her and himself both to the wooden deck at their feet.

A high-pitched shriek pierced the fog from a little way down the pier. The girl pushed her companion roughly off of her and leaped to her feet. "Julia! Are you all right?"

"Eek!" Another girl, slightly older than the other two teenagers, was dancing about in the fog, her summer yellow robes flapping around her as she hopped and shivered. "Eek! Eek! Eek!"

Alexandra Quick ran to her sister, who was shuddering and wrapping her arms around herself. "A cannonball went right through me! It was cold! And creepy! Like someone walking on my grave!" With one more dramatic shudder, Julia King dropped her arms and tossed her curly brown hair. "And," she said, with an aristocratic Virginia drawl, "I didn't have anyone gallant enough to save me!"

Coming up behind Alexandra, Payton Smith flushed. "Sorry. You were too far away..."

"Nobody needed saving." Alexandra straightened her robes. "You know they're just ghosts. They can't hurt anyone."

The pirate ships had come to a halt far up on the beach, sitting in the sand at the edge of the wizarding town of New Roanoke. With roars and cries and a chorus of "Arrrs!", the ghostly pirates began descending from their vessels, floating through the air until they reached the ground. Some charged up the shore and into the town, while others began pursuing the sightseers on the beach, who either screamed theatrically and ran or took pictures.

Abashed, Payton said, "Come on – don't tell me you didn't flinch a little. I didn't know they were going to fire cannonballs at us!"

"Ghost cannonballs." Alexandra shook her head, ignoring Julia's wink.

The annual pirate fleet invasion was a major tourist attraction. Wizards came from all over the Confederation to see it. As the popularity of the event had grown, so had the number of ghosts required, and the Bureau of Hauntings was allowing even ghosts who had never set foot on a ship during their lifetimes to leave their usual haunts and join the 'pirate fleet.'

"This is better than a movie," Payton said. "You know, you could make a lot of money filming stuff like this."

"You could also get yourself arrested for violating the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy," Alexandra said. "And get any Muggles you show it to Obliviated, thanks to the WODAMND Act."

"I know," Payton said. "I wasn't planning to actually do it. But don't you wish our friends could see this? And our families could come visit when it's not Muggle Awareness Week?"

Alexandra shrugged. Unlike Payton, who lived with his Muggle family year-round, Alexandra spent most of the year in the wizarding world. When she went home for the summer – home in Larkin Mills, not here in Roanoke with Julia and Ms. King – she hardly talked about magic at all.

Alexandra wasn't as excited by ghosts as Payton, and neither was Julia, but Payton didn't seem to be in a hurry to join the others in rushing off the pier to watch the pirates 'plunder' the town. He was shuffling along rather slowly, causing Alexandra and Julia to slow down as well.

"Oh, dear," Julia said, noticing the young man's bashfulness. "This is your last date, isn't it? And I've been tagging along with you all day! How dreadful of me!"

"It's not a date, and you aren't tagging along," Alexandra said. "We came to see the pirate fleet together."

Payton was chagrined, but Julia smiled. "You two should have some time alone. Who wants their older sister around as a chaperone?"

"You're not –" Alexandra said, but Julia gave her a kiss on the cheek and said, "Shush! I'm going to go into town. Maybe I'll find some chivalrous young man to protect me from being ravished!"

"Ghosts can't ravish you," Alexandra muttered.

Julia gave another shudder. "I can still feel that cannonball passing through me." She held out a hand to Payton. "If I don't see you again before you leave, Payton, I hope you have a wonderful school year, and hopefully Alexandra and I will see you again the next time she comes to visit."

"Thank you," Payton said, shaking Julia's hand. "Same here. And thanks for inviting me to your house. That was really cool. Especially the winged horses. Tell your mother I said thanks, too."

"I shall." Julia gave Alexandra another wink, then turned to walk away down the steps to the beach, leaving Payton and Alexandra alone on the fog-shrouded pier.

After a moment, Payton said, "I thought this was a date."

Alexandra watched her sister disappear into the mist. In the direction of the town, pirates were arrring and singing pirate songs.

Payton cleared his throat. "Take a walk?" Without waiting for an answer, he took Alexandra's hand.

She allowed him to lead her back down the pier, toward the end that jutted out over the water. This wasn't the first time he'd held her hand, but it was their first real time alone together. Julia's teasing notwithstanding, she and her mother had been rather steadfast chaperones.

In the month that Alexandra had been staying with the Kings, she'd had several chaperoned 'dates' with Payton. Usually, she and Julia took the Muggle ferry from the island to a small seaside town that was next door to New Roanoke. The townspeople were supposedly unaware of their wizard neighbors, though Alexandra wondered how ignorant they really were, living next to a place that conjured fog banks in the middle of a sunny summer morning. She'd also seen wizards in the town dressed in Old Colonial garb.

Payton lived in another town not far away. He was actually more familiar with New Roanoke than Alexandra; during the year, he attended a wizarding day school there. He had taken her to the Magibotanical Gardens, and they had attended the Summer Cotillion together.

She had to give him credit – he hadn't realized how much attention he'd get for dating the youngest daughter of the notorious Dark wizard Abraham Thorn. But when purebloods and traditionalists made cutting remarks or gave him the evil eye, he just returned a cocky smile. (Or, when it was other kids, rude gestures, which had almost resulted in him and Alexandra getting into a wizard-duel with a bunch of Old Colonials at the Cotillion.)

The previous week, Alexandra and the Kings had brought Payton to Croatoa to show him the Kings' winged horse ranch. Alexandra was a bit jealous at how easily Payton was able to ride a Granian; while it was his first time on a winged horse, he had ridden non-magical horses before.

Today, Ms. King, who had seen the pirate ghost invasion many times, was waiting for the girls with her Thestral-drawn carriage at Astoria's Cafe. Alexandra was returning home in just a few days, so this was the last time she and Payton would see each other this summer.

Payton seemed nervous as they walked along the pier. The fog swallowed the sound of their footsteps and muffled the pandemonium from the pirates.

"So, you're going home on Sunday," he said.

"Yeah," Alexandra said.

"It'll be easier, in some ways. To stay in touch, I mean. You can use your cell phone at home, and get online."

"Yeah. I wish Julia could get online, too."

That answer didn't seem to be what he was hoping for. Alexandra wondered what was wrong. They reached the end of the pier and stood there over the gray choppy water. Payton's hand felt very

warm around hers. He was a gangly boy, just beginning to fill in, and he had a pleasant, square face with a mop of rust-orange hair that he'd been trying to gel, style, and do other things with all summer. He had been slightly taller than Alexandra when they'd first met at the Roanoke Spring Cotillion the previous year, and now he was almost a head taller than her. He complained about growing so fast that his knees and elbows hurt.

"So, um, are we a couple?" he asked.

Alexandra blinked in surprise. "I don't know. Do you want to be a couple?"

She had enjoyed her time with Payton. She had even thought about whether Payton wanted to do more than hold hands with her – she knew he probably did – and whether she wanted to. Assuming they were ever out of sight of Julia and Ms. King.

They were out of sight of everyone now. Half an hour earlier, they'd been in full view of hundreds of witches and wizards, but now they had the pier all to themselves, and they were cloaked in the densest fog Alexandra had ever seen. Even sounds were dampened and distorted; she heard a flapping sound from some sea bird that might have been just overhead or far across the water.

Payton let go of her hands, and said, "Check this out." He drew his wand with one hand and produced a crumpled up piece of paper with the other.

She eyed the paper. "Okay."

With dramatic gestures, he moved his wand in what Alexandra recognized as a simple Transfiguration. He finished the spell with a look of intense concentration. The paper curled and twisted, darkened into a deep crimson, burst open, and became a stiff, papery flower. He presented it to her with a flourish.

She took it. "Thank you."

"I've been practicing all summer." When Alexandra failed to be duly impressed, he added, "I'm one of the best in my class at Transfiguration."

Alexandra held up the not-quite-living flower. Most Charmbridge students could do better than this by eighth grade. "It's very nice," she said, trying to sound appreciative. "Wait – how do you practice at home? Don't you get warnings from the Trace Office?"

"Minor Transfigurations are on the list of approved spells Muggle-borns can practice at home."

"Since when?"

Payton shrugged. "Every Territory has its own rules. Maybe Central is stricter than Roanoke?"

Alexandra felt a flash of anger and jealousy. She wasn't allowed to cast so much as a Light Spell at home! Then Payton took her hands again, pressing them together over the flower. She looked down at their hands and back up at him.

"So, uh, I like you," he said.

"I like you, too."

He smiled and opened his mouth, and she said, "But –"

His smile faltered, and he closed his mouth.

"But," she continued, "it's not like we'll be able to keep..."

"Dating?"

"Yeah. I mean, I don't know how often I'll be able to visit Roanoke, but at most we'll see each other a couple times a year."

"We can talk on the phone, and chat online."

"Not while I'm at school."

"Owls, then."

She wasn't sure this was realistic. How could you even call it 'dating' if you only saw each other a few times during the summer? But Payton was looking at her in a way no boy had ever looked at her before, and even though it made her confused and uncertain, she

also kind of liked it, and she knew that he'd be crushed if she tried to be all pragmatic. And it wasn't as if there were any boys back home or at Charmbridge whom she was going to date.

"We can talk on the phone and chat online," she said. "And send owls."

He smiled, and then he leaned forward and kissed her.

Alexandra hadn't been expecting that. Of course she should have. Her heart raced and she felt ridiculous at her fluttering nerves. Technically, it wasn't her first kiss, but it was the first time a boy had kissed her.

After holding her breath for one startled moment, she closed her eyes and forced herself to relax. Payton was trying to kiss her with assurance, as if he knew exactly what he was doing, but his hands had suddenly gone sweaty. All things considered, though, she thought it wasn't a bad kiss. She kissed him back.

They separated after a few seconds. Her face was flushed and her heart was beating much too fast.

Payton studied her while trying to be cool – assessing her reaction, she realized. She must have seemed inviting, or at least not uninviting, because he slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him.

Feeling him pressed against her made her heart beat even faster, and she wondered if he could feel it. She laid a hand on his shoulder – whether it was a staying gesture or an encouraging one, she wasn't quite sure. She fought to suppress the impulse to swallow, or lick her lips. She did not want to appear nervous. She also didn't want to seem ready to make out with him after one kiss.

"I wanted to do that at the Cotillion," he said.

"Why didn't you?"

He turned a little red. "Well, everyone was watching us all the time, including your sister."

"Yeah, she was waiting for you to kiss me."

Payton's mouth twitched. "What about you?"

"Arrr! Well, look what we have here!" growled a sepulchral voice. Payton and Alexandra both jumped and whirled around. A ghost had emerged from the mist. He wore a wizard's hat, but his clothes were ragged nautical garb and there was a cutlass hanging at his belt. Alexandra guessed that this particular ghost actually had been a pirate, because his translucent flesh had a mottled, drowned texture, and there was ghostly seaweed in his hair.

"Up to no good, the two of ye!" said the pirate. "Don't ye have proper parents? No decent witch would be lettin' some dogleg of a wand paw her!"

Payton said, "I wasn't –"

"Why don't you mind your own business?" Alexandra snapped.

The ghost glowered, and mist curled around him. "Arr, yer a mouthy little hussy!"

Alexandra drew her wand. "What did you call me?"

"Alex! Jeez!" Payton whispered.

The pirate roared with laughter. "What're ye gonna do, little girl?" He blew a ghostly exhalation that frosted the air in front of him. "Ye can't threaten a ghost, strumpet!"

Alexandra turned red, and spat Latin as she gestured with her wand.

The force of her spell sent streams of vapor billowing away from the ghost. He spun around and began fading, turning ever more insubstantial.

"Call me a hussy or a strumpet again," she said.

The ghost's horrified expression was the last thing visible before he dissolved into the mist.

Alexandra breathed out heavily, then turned to Payton. His eyes were as wide as the ghost's.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

"A Banishing Spell," she said. "Just a lesser one."

He stared at her. "Where'd you learn a Banishing Spell?"

"At school."

"We don't learn anything like that."

"It was kind of extracurricular."

"You're a little scary sometimes," he said.

She frowned.

"Hey – kidding." He leaned in to kiss her again. She received the kiss willingly enough, but she was thinking about the ghost who'd made her lose her temper.

"Payton," she said, after their lips separated, "I don't want this to be a big deal, okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just... remember, we're only fourteen. We're both going to see other people sooner or later. It's not like we're going to grow up and get married."

"You're already planning our break-up and thinking about who you're going to marry?" Payton sounded amused and hurt at the same time.

"No!" She shook her head and sighed. How could she explain that she was never going to marry anyone?

"Who thinks that far ahead?" He put his arms around her again. She didn't object, and they didn't leave the pier until the mist began to thin and they heard the ghosts returning to their phantom ships on the beach.

Julia repeated Payton's question when Alexandra told her about their conversation on the carriage ride back to the island. Julia

wanted to hear all the details about the time the couple had spent on the pier. Alexandra let Julia think that she was reluctant to talk about it in front of Ms. King, but the incident with the ghost and Alexandra's words to Payton made Julia tsk and shake her head.

"Poor boy – what a thing to say! You have all the time in the world, Alexandra."

Alexandra smiled at her half-sister.

No, she thought. I have seven years.

"All we did was kiss," Alexandra insisted in Julia's room that night.

"That's all?" Julia was sitting on her bed, while Alexandra sat in front of a full-length three-sided mirror with Nina, one of the Kings' house-elves. Alexandra watched, fascinated in spite of herself, as beneath Nina's fingers her hair fanned, curled, straightened, flattened, braided, and arranged itself in ways Muggle stylists could only dream of. From three different angles, her reflections in Julia's enchanted mirror preened and batted their lashes while Nina worked.

"We were only alone for a few minutes," Alexandra said. "What did you expect us to do?"

Julia sighed, disappointed. "At least you have a beau."

"I guess." Alexandra felt bad for Julia, who was two years older than her and much prettier. But here in Roanoke, being Abraham Thorn's daughter was worse than being a half-blood. There had been few Muggle-borns besides Payton at the Summer Cotillion, and very few boys had asked Julia to dance. No one but Payton had asked Alexandra.

Julia leaned forward and threw her arms around Alexandra's shoulders from behind, causing Nina to step aside and wait patiently. "My dear Alexandra. Why, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're turning into a girl!"

Alexandra gave her sister's reflection a sour look, which the magic mirror translated into a pout. Alexandra rolled her eyes, and her reflection held a hand to her cheek and blushed girlishly. Alexandra started to turn red, and Julia giggled.

Alexandra had let her hair grow a little longer since the last time she'd been to Croatoa, and this summer, Julia had finally talked her into letting Nina pierce her ears. She didn't see what the big deal was about earrings and a hair style, but she did look like a very different girl in the mirror – and she had changed in many more ways that were less visible.

All last year, she had been consumed by grief and denial over the death of Julia's brother – her half-brother – Maximilian. She had thought of little else. Her obsession with trying to bring Maximilian back to life, despite everyone telling her it was impossible, had almost led to her own death.

That she was now doomed herself after having come to terms with her brother's death was a bitter twist of fate. Sometimes she thought she should be more worried that she only had seven years to live. She wondered if something was wrong with her. Wouldn't most people be freaking out with a magical oath hanging over their head like that?

She did think about how to escape it sometimes, though her ideas were rather vague. Maybe it just hadn't sunk in yet. Also, having been so obsessed and single-minded the previous year had almost cost her everything – her friends, her family, even her place in the wizarding world. Her half-sister Valeria still wasn't speaking to her. She didn't want to let a new obsession turn her into a crazy person again. She'd figure out what to do eventually.

She hadn't told anyone else, though. She was sure Julia would freak out. So would her best friend, Anna. And what could they do about it?

"I'd like to visit the Thorn family crypt before I leave," she said.

Julia raised her eyebrows. "To speak to our ancestors? Or to say good-bye to Max?" Behind them, Nina stood silently, her expression solemn.

Alexandra turned away from the mirror. "I've already said good-bye to Max."

Julia considered a moment. "Very well. I'll ask Mother."

"Actually, I was hoping I could go alone."

Her sister frowned. "I don't think so, Alexandra. Those woods can be dangerous."

"You're telling me you and Max never in your life went into the woods on your own?"

"Max certainly did." Julia's mouth twitched. "All right, I suppose I may have gone exploring a few times myself – but never very far! There are giant flytraps and strangle-vines and Dugbogs and Boggarts and Will-o-wisps and other nasty things, and you never know what sort of people may be hiding there as well."

"The ghosts can lead me to the crypt and back."

"Why do you want to go alone?"

Alexandra hesitated, then told her the truth: "I think our father will be there."

Julia's eyes widened. "He's contacted you?"

"No. He hasn't contacted me at all, despite everything that happened..." Alexandra paused. Julia knew some of what had happened at the end of last year – Alexandra's second visit to the Lands Below, ending in the death of Darla Dearborn – but not the full extent of what Alexandra had learned, and what had happened to her. "I have a feeling he's waiting for me. I can't explain it. I just think he'll be there. It's where he used to meet Max."

And where they planned the mission that got Max killed. She could see that Julia was thinking the same thing. "I need to talk to him again. There's nothing you need to worry about. But it's better for you if you're not there, just in case."

"Just in case an Inquisitor asks me when was the last time I saw my father, like they do all of us?" Julia's eyebrows were arched now, and her tone was not as soft. "Alexandra, I do believe you're trying to protect me."

Alexandra didn't say anything.

Julia glanced at Nina, who was watching both girls with concern. Then she touched Alexandra's cheek. "I'll accompany you," she said, in a firm voice. "We can do it without telling Mother." Nina twitched. "But I am most certainly not letting you go into those woods by yourself, not even with our family ghosts. It's not as if they could pull you out of quicksand."

Alexandra twitched at that, but as far as she knew, Valeria had never told Julia about the quicksand incident. She nodded reluctantly. "All right."

Julia smiled. "It didn't occur to you I might have a thing or two to say to Father as well, did it?"

"No, I guess not," Alexandra admitted.

Julia patted her cheek, and told the patient house-elf, "I'm sorry, dear Nina, we've quite interrupted all the lovely things you were doing with Alexandra's hair."

"Is all right, Miss Julia." Nina stepped back up onto the stool next to Alexandra. "Nina thinks this style is most prettiest –" She wiggled her fingers, and Alexandra's hair curled into tight, neat ringlets falling all about her face. "– but she is afraid Miss Alex will wear her own way as soon as she gets home."

"It's pretty," Alexandra said, to placate the elf, while her reflections began pursing their lips and winking again. But she was thinking about Julia's words, and the sudden firmness in her voice. Julia's soft manner could be deceiving – she was still a daughter of Abraham Thorn.

They sneaked out of the house together two nights later. Charlie, Alexandra's raven familiar, sat on her shoulder, and Olina followed at their heels, wringing her hands and looking around nervously. Bringing one of the house-elves along was the only way Alexandra and Julia had been able to persuade them not to tell Ms. King.

The Kings' mansion sat at the top of the highest point on the island, a large hill that overlooked the ocean on one side and dense, swampy woods on the other. The two girls and the house-elf descended toward the wooded side, and as they reached the trees

at the bottom of the hill, Alexandra and Julia lit their wands. Above their heads, monkey-like Clabberts scurried from branch to branch, flashing the luminescent red nodules in their foreheads in warning. Charlie cawed, and croaks, hoots, tweets, and less identifiable noises answered from deep in the woods. Julia clung to Alexandra's arm and shivered melodramatically.

"If you're scared, you can turn back," Alexandra said lightly.

Julia stopped shivering and swatted Alexandra's shoulder. "I'll do no such thing!"

Alexandra's smile faded when she noticed how Olin was trembling. The house-elf wasn't playing at being scared. "You really don't have to follow us, Olin," she said. "We'll be fine."

Olin mumbled something inaudible, then said, a bit louder, "Naughty misses needs elveses to keep them out of trouble."

"How old do we have to be before we don't need supervision?" Alexandra asked.

"Old enough to not be doing foolish things," Olin said.

Julia laughed and took Olin's hand. The three of them continued deeper into the woods, following a trail that soon vanished. The dark, silent trees hunched over them, hiding the sky, and they often stumbled through mud and vines and dense undergrowth. The lights of Croatoa were far behind them when they came to a stone crypt rising in a small, slightly elevated clearing surrounded by the thickest woods. Mist clung to the ground all around it. Charlie took off from Alexandra's shoulder and cawed loudly, as if to challenge any creatures in the night, though the raven did not venture far, merely lighting atop the entrance to the crypt.

"It is rather spooky, isn't it?" Julia said. "I know ghosts like to be out of the way of mortal traffic, but I think if I were dead and still lingering about on earth, I wouldn't want to live somewhere so dark and dismal."

A muffled voice drifted out of the darkness. "You, if the fates are kind, will never linger here with us, Julia." Out of one of the trees ahead of them stepped a ghost with a sword at his hip.

"Hello, Uncle Joshua," said Julia.

Joshua Thorn had been a handsome young man who died in a Regimental Officer Corps uniform. He tipped his hat to the two girls. "Does your mother know you're here?" To Alexandra, he said sternly, "You promised you would not sneak out here again without Thalia's permission, Great-Grandniece."

Julia turned to her. "Did you?" She pursed her lips.

A deep, familiar voice said, "Allow me to remonstrate with my daughters, if that is necessary, Great-Uncle."

Julia's grip tightened on Alexandra's shoulder. Alexandra stared at the shadows by the entrance to the Thorn family crypt as a tall, bearded man in a black cloak stepped out into the small circle of moonlight that reached the clearing. A raven much larger than Charlie sat on his shoulder.

"I'm pleased to see you both, my dears," said Abraham Thorn.

Behind him, other family ghosts trailed out of the crypt, including the patriarch of the Thorn clan, Absalom Thorn, Alexandra's four-times-great-grandfather. She wondered what her father had been talking about with his ancestors.

Joshua Thorn said, "You're not surprised to see them, Abraham."

Abraham Thorn smiled. "Olina. How are Nina, Deezie, Rolly, and Gun-Gun?"

Alexandra realized guiltily that she had almost forgotten the house-elf. Olina stuttered: "T-they is well, M-Master T-Thorn, sir."

"I'm pleased to hear it. I appreciate your seeing to my daughters' safety. I couldn't ask for more conscientious guardians. But you may return to the house, now. Alexandra and Julia will be fine with me."

"Yes, Master Thorn," Nina said, and disappeared with a pop.

Abraham Thorn turned back to Alexandra and Julia. "I suppose a hug would be too much to ask for?"

Alexandra and Julia looked at each other. Then Julia slowly walked over to him. He put his arms around her as she leaned against his shoulder. He stroked her hair and murmured something in her ear, and she seemed to relax a little in his embrace.

They spent several moments standing together like that, and then Julia stepped aside and their father looked at Alexandra.

She locked eyes with him as she walked forward, and stopped just out of reach.

"We have things to talk about," she said.

He paused, and his eyes darted in Julia's direction. Then he nodded. "Yes, we do." He held out a hand. Alexandra hesitated, and took it.

Time stopped. There was no breeze. There were no sounds from the woods. Julia stood absolutely motionless, Charlie was as still as stone, and even the ghosts were frozen in place.

"We have only a short time," Abraham Thorn said.

"This must be a pretty powerful spell," Alexandra said.

"It's a very powerful spell. But if either of us moves more than a few inches, or uses magic that extends beyond our bodies, it will end, so it's not quite as powerful as you might think. Nonetheless, it's very useful. Did you want to speak to me about Time-Stopping, Alexandra?"

She turned her attention back to him. "No. I wanted to speak about the Deathly Regiment."

"Absalom told me that you've learned the truth about the abominable Regiment."

"It's why you're trying to overthrow the Confederation, isn't it?" Without waiting for an answer, she said, "Why couldn't you tell me? Why can't you tell everyone?"

"I swore the same oaths everyone else does before being initiated into the dark secret at the heart of the Confederation. Even I can't break an Unbreakable Vow."

"I didn't swear an oath," she said. "And I know the truth."

Her father squeezed her hand, and there was approval in his smile, but the smile became fixed when she said, "They need to be stopped. But not your way."

"And how would you stop them, Alexandra?"

"Anna's father says there are others like him in the Wizards' Congress who want to end the Deathly Regiment."

"Geming Chu still believes that you can vote evil out of office. I tried that path, and I was not the first. Do you really think the Wizards' Congress actually controls the Confederation?"

"Who does, then? The Elect?"

"Yes. The old families, the ones with the power, the money, the influence..."

"Families like the Thorns."

"Once, yes. Our names are registered among the Elect."

"Not me. I'm a half-blood."

"You are no less than any of my other daughters, my dear."

"I want to ask you a question," Alexandra said, "and I want you to promise to tell me the truth. No matter what."

"Another boon, Alexandra?"

"I'm your daughter. Do I need a boon to demand the truth from you?"

He fixed his penetrating gaze on her, and she bit her lip and tried not to shiver. She was conscious of seconds ticking by. She had to ask these questions, and she could never ask them in front of Julia.

"What is your question?" he asked.

"When you sent me and Maximilian to the Lands Below, did you know one of us was going to die?"

Abraham Thorn's expression became ice cold. His fingers that were closed around hers now felt like stone – not squeezing her hand, not releasing it, but hard and ungiving.

"You truly believe that of me?" he asked softly.

His countenance was dark and her every instinct was to look away, but she forced herself to meet his gaze without flinching. "I'm asking you."

He held her gaze a moment longer. She wondered if he would curse her. No, that was unlikely. But she had just asked her father: Did you send your son to die? Did you send me to die? Whatever the answer, she knew the question had cut him to the core.

But she had to know.

"No," he said, "I did not."

She should have felt relief. Instead, she came to the wrenching realization that she wasn't sure whether she believed him. And she thought he knew it.

Then the wind stirred Julia's hair, and Absalom Thorn moved toward them, and two ravens cawed alarms. Her father's spell had ended, and someone was hurling a curse from the shadows of the trees.

Abraham Thorn raised his arm and his cloak acted as a shield, though Alexandra didn't hear him cast a spell. A streak of golden fire rebounded off of it and scorched a path through the thick vegetation growing near the crypt. He spoke an incantation aloud, something Alexandra didn't recognize, and the trees from which the attack had come ignited, throwing explosive heat and flames that outlined a dark silhouette for one moment before it vanished.

Julia screamed and ducked; a white bolt of electricity flashed past her and cut through Abraham Thorn's robes as he spun. A soft glimmering outline appeared around him and deflected most of the

lightning. Alexandra felt an electrical tingle from its proximity, and then her father stumbled back.

Alexandra moved toward her sister. "Julia, get down!"

A woman appeared out of nowhere and cast another hex at Abraham Thorn. He deflected it and sent it flying back at her, splitting and multiplying in a spray of green and white fireballs. One passed dangerously close to Alexandra's head. She ducked, and then Julia grabbed her and threw them both to the ground. "You get down!" Julia said.

Alexandra raised her head and her wand and said, "Protego!" Then she gasped when she recognized the witch who'd just Apparated out of sight.

Alexandra's Shield Charm covered her and Julia, and their father bellowed, "You dare attack me on my family's burial grounds! You dare endanger my daughters?"

"You, Abraham, claiming to respect the dead?" The witch's voice came from above, as if she were on the roof of the crypt. "Concern for your daughters' welfare? Don't make me laugh!"

"Who is that?" Julia whispered.

"Diana Grimm," Alexandra whispered back. "Dean Grimm's sister." Spells flashed back and forth in the night. "Charlie!"

Julia clung to her. "Stay down, Alexandra! Charlie knows to stay out of the way!"

Diana Grimm was Apparating from one location to another, gone before Abraham Thorn could blast her and casting curses from another position.

"What's she doing here?" Alexandra asked.

Julia winced as a hex showered them with mud. "Obviously, trying to arrest Father."

"No." Alexandra watched a thick, ancient tree fall after being split in two by a Severing Charm. "She's trying to kill him."

She felt like she should do something.

"Stay down," Julia repeated. "All we'll do is get in the way."

"Don't look for help from your second," Diana Grimm yelled. "He wasn't as watchful as he should have been." Her wand flared red and gold and fire blossomed from its tip.

Abraham Thorn dispelled the fireball she threw at him as if he were batting away a moth. "Do you actually believe I need help to deal with you?"

The air was suddenly full of owls – black owls that dove at him in an endless column, hooting and screeching and heedless of the spells he cast that blew them into feathers, which quickly dissipated like smoke. Then he slashed the air with his wand, and giant invisible fingers tore white streaks in the air with a terrible ripping sound. Where they tore, dirt, trees, owls, and the air itself vanished into nothingness.

Diana Grimm Apparated away from the unnatural tears in space, and they disappeared as if they had been illusions. Alexandra blinked away the unsettling blind spots in her vision. Her father cast a Shield Spell to block a triple-forked spear of green lightning.

Alexandra gritted her teeth as the two combatants exchanged curses. There were no signs of either her familiar or her father's; the ghosts were zipping all about, shouting angrily at Diana Grimm, until Grimm pointed her wand at one of them and Cordelia Hallowell disappeared in a cloud of vapor. Then the ghosts fled from the Special Inquisitor. But the distraction kept her from Apparating before Thorn snarled something and raised his fist, and suddenly the earth itself rose up around her.

Diana Grimm only had time to let out one startled cry as mud and dirt embedded with stones and roots wrapped around her. Her face turned red, as if she were being squeezed, hard.

Abraham Thorn said, "This has gone on long enough. This is your end, Diana." He made a flattening gesture with his hand, and the column of earth sank back into the ground, pulling the witch with it.

Alexandra caught a glimpse of the Inquisitor's arm waving in the air, just for an instant, before she was gone.

Julia gasped. Alexandra stared at the ground where Diana Grimm had been standing a moment ago. Then she was on her feet, running to her father before she had time to think. She grabbed his arm and said: "Don't!"

His eyes were alight with terrible, bloody triumph. He seemed almost inhuman when he turned his gaze on her. "What?"

"Let her go," Alexandra said. "You don't have to kill her."

"You want me to spare her?" Fury and astonishment mottled his face. "You have already used your boon, Alexandra."

"I shouldn't need a boon – you're my father!"

He stiffened. Alexandra remembered what she had said – what she had just accused him of – moments ago. But his rage was already dimming.

"Please," she said, "I've seen enough people die." She swallowed and glanced over at Julia, who had risen shakily to her feet and was staring at the two of them.

"Julia can't see Thestrals yet," Alexandra said softly.

Abraham Thorn looked at his other daughter, and back at Alexandra. The hard iron in his expression softened, ever so slightly. He glared at the patch of earth where the Special Inquisitor had been entombed, and lifted his hand.

With a sound like an enormous, hacking cough, the ground belched up a huge clod of earth and stone, in which arms and legs were visible like large, unearthed bugs. Alexandra ran to the disgorged body and found Diana Grimm lying still and unbreathing. Her long black hair was plastered to her head, and her face was covered with mud.

Alexandra knelt to wipe the mud away from the woman's mouth and nose. She jumped when Grimm coughed once, rolled over, and began gasping and spitting up dirt.

Abraham Thorn strode slowly over to them, and studied the two of them with an unreadable expression.

Diana Grimm lifted her head, but she couldn't quite breathe. She made more choking sounds, and her outstretched hand clutched at the dirt.

"You owe Alexandra your life." Abraham Thorn looked at his daughter. "Be mindful of the things you ask, my child."

He turned to face Julia, who was standing behind him, pale and shaken. He stepped toward her and reached out a hand. She turned her face away.

He dropped his hand. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "I'm sorry our meetings must be disturbed like this."

"They always will be," Julia said, "as long as you're the Enemy of the Confederation."

He stood still a moment longer, and then Apparated away. Alexandra heard wings flapping in the night.

Daughter of Thorn

Diana Grimm rose to her feet. She seemed barely able to stand, but her expression was so furious that even if Alexandra and Julia had been inclined to offer assistance, they wouldn't have dared. The Special Inquisitor spent several moments taking long, deep breaths, while the Thorn ghosts drifted back out of the trees. Alexandra saw Charlie perched above the entrance to the crypt, and made a beckoning gesture. The raven came to her, landing on her shoulder.

Absalom Thorn confronted the Inquisitor as the other spirits congregated around them. "You violated the sanctuary of our hallowed ground. It would have been a fitting fate for you to join us here."

Grimm didn't answer. She was studying the broken earth at her feet. Her hands opened and closed, making fists.

"What are you doing here in Roanoke?" Alexandra asked.

Grimm turned her angry gaze on her. "Hunting your father."

"Well, that didn't work out so well, did it?" Alexandra held her stare defiantly. "What did you do to our cousin Cordelia?"

"She'll be back."

"She will, but your Banishment will cause her anguish and torment until she returns to this world," Absalom Thorn said. "That was a foul, Dark thing you did, woman!"

"Don't tell me your ghost stories!" Grimm spat. "Banishment doesn't hurt you and you know it. If you hadn't been aiding and abetting that warlock –"

"You intruded upon our resting place –"

"You've been collaborating with your criminal descendant for –"

Alexandra said, "Accio wand!" interrupting both of them. With a small shower of dirt, a wand flew out of the ground and into Alexandra's hand. She slowly extended it to its owner.

"Why don't you just leave?" she said. "Or would you like to interrogate me and Julia first?"

The Special Inquisitor hesitated, then reached out and closed her fingers around her wand and pulled it from Alexandra's grasp. Then, to Alexandra's surprise, she Apparated away without another word.

"You might say thank you!" Julia shouted into the empty space in her wake.

The girls stood surrounded by the ghosts of their ancestors. Absalom Thorn said, "You should return to the house."

"Will Cousin Cordelia be all right?" Alexandra asked.

"She will be back," he said.

Julia took Alexandra's hand, and Alexandra allowed her great-great-great-great-grandfather to lead them back to Croatoa. Charlie took off from her shoulder as soon as they exited the woods, flapping ahead of them up the hill to the mansion. There was a small light burning in Alexandra's room, and much more light downstairs.

"Oh dear," Julia said, "I believe Mother is up."

"Guess we're in trouble," Alexandra said.

Julia gave her a wan smile. "You did know we'd have to tell her about this?"

"Of course you must," Absalom Thorn said.

Julia sighed and squeezed Alexandra's hand. "Well, she can't do too much to you since you're leaving tomorrow. I might spend the rest of the summer grounded."

"Sorry. I'll tell her it was all my fault."

Julia shook her head. "Yes, you forced me to come with you. I simply had no say in the matter."

Alexandra smiled without much humor.

When they reached the steps of the mansion, the door swung open. Thalia King stood silhouetted in the light, large and imposing in heavy velvet robes, with waves of black hair spilling down her shoulders. Her arms were folded and Alexandra knew she'd been watching them come all the way up the hill.

"Thalia," Absalom Thorn said. The ghost didn't approach the steps, but remained in the shadows beyond the edge of light spilling across the grass from the mansion's interior. "I must take responsibility for allowing Julia and Alexandra to venture out at night to visit Maximilian's tomb. They requested it of me and, entirely against my better judgment, I acquiesced. I assure you that I would not allow them to come to any harm."

"I know you wouldn't if you could help it, Absalom," Ms. King said. "And it's very generous of you to take responsibility, when we both know that you couldn't have kept these foolish girls out of the woods if you'd tried."

Alexandra and Julia both looked down and said nothing.

"Come inside, girls," Ms. King said. "Thank you for bringing them back, Absalom."

The wizard tipped his hat. Before he turned away, Alexandra looked up and caught his eye. She glanced up at her room with a tiny jerk of her head. He frowned, before his glow dimmed and he faded almost to invisibility as he floated away from the house.

It wasn't Thalia King's way to shout or lecture, but Alexandra could feel the anger and disapproval from her before she said a word. Ms. King held herself rigidly upright, eyes distant, as they entered the house. In the sitting room just off the main foyer, she made Alexandra and Julia sit down opposite her in large, red-cushioned chairs. Then, without raising her voice or saying a single unkind thing, she told them how disappointed she was, until both girls hung their heads in silence.

When they were permitted to speak at last, they both stumbled through an account of their father's visit, followed by Diana Grimm's nearly fatal attempt to apprehend him. Ms. King listened with growing concern. She pursed her lips when Alexandra told her it had been her idea to go to the crypt.

"I see," Julia's mother said at last. There was a long silence. Alexandra kept her eyes on the floor. Gun-Gun, the oldest of the Kings' house-elves, came hobbling in, carrying a silver tray with hot tea. He set it down on the low table in front of Ms. King, poured tea from the pot into three cups with what seemed like one quick splash, then retreated from the sitting room, all without saying a word.

Ms. King took her cup and sipped from it slowly, then said, "You should have told me, Alexandra. You shouldn't have sneaked into the woods at night. And you shouldn't have let her, Julia."

"It wasn't Julia's fault," Alexandra said, but Ms. King raised a hand to cut her off.

"Unless you used an Imperius Curse on her, it was. I trust there will be no further excursions tonight?"

"No, Mother," said Julia.

"No, ma'am," said Alexandra.

Ms. King said nothing as Julia and Alexandra picked up their teacups and drank. The tea warmed Alexandra, but did little to make her feel less miserable.

They sat in silence while the girls finished their tea. When their cups were empty, Ms. King said, "Go to bed, both of you. Julia, we'll talk about your punishment after Alexandra leaves tomorrow."

The two chastened girls trudged upstairs. Alexandra paused at the door to her room, but Ms. King had sent Deeze and Olina to 'see them off to bed' – meaning, make sure they didn't stay up talking.

"Don't worry." Julia gave Alexandra a hug. "I wasn't really planning to go anywhere after you leave. It's been much more fun with you here."

Alexandra gave her a small smile, and received a kiss on the cheek without embarrassment. "Good night, Julia. Thanks for coming with me."

"Thank you for not trying to sneak out by yourself this time." Julia winked at her, and went to her room, followed by Olina.

Alexandra paused at the door to her own room and said to Deezie, "Okay, you can tell Ms. King I went to bed like I'm supposed to."

"Miss Alex has gotten dirty," Deezie said. "Doesn't Miss Alex want a bath? Deezie can make one, snap-snap-eeek!"

Alexandra had been examining the mud and grass stains clinging to her robes as she opened the door, but she raised her head sharply at Deezie's horrified squeak.

Floating in the center of the room was Absalom Thorn. The ghost glowed less brightly than he had outside, but the luminescent outline around his figure cast more light than the candle Deezie had left on Alexandra's desk.

Charlie had already flown in through the window and perched on one of the posts of Alexandra's canopy bed. Looking down at the ancient, robed wizard, the raven squawked: "Wicked!"

Absalom Thorn's eyes narrowed beneath his bushy brows and the wide brim of his hat. "Your raven is an insolent bird."

"Pretty bird," Charlie retorted.

"Deezie, I won't be needing a bath tonight, I can wait until tomorrow morning," Alexandra said to the trembling house-elf. "My great-great-great-great grandfather and I are going to talk."

Deezie gulped. "Yes, m-miss." With a nervous bob of her head, she retreated from the room, not persisting as she normally would. Alexandra closed the door gently behind her.

"She'll probably tell Ms. King you were here," Alexandra said.

Absalom Thorn folded his arms. "What of it? I am not some wight who is confined to haunting catacombs, and you know my opinion of your sneaking about."

Alexandra took out her wand and cast a spell: "Muffliato."

Thorn shook his head.

"How is Cousin Cordelia?" Alexandra asked. "Is what you said true, that you suffer when Banished?"

The ghost scowled. "I have never been Banished. I cannot truly say. Cordelia will be back... soon."

Alexandra thought about the pirate she'd Banished the day of the pirate fleet invasion. But it was just a Lesser Banishment, which was only supposed to send a spirit somewhere else in the material realm. "Where do you go when you're Banished?"

"A place that is beyond the Veil and no place," said the ghost. "An empty place of bitter isolation. Or so I have been told. Others experience it differently. Indian spirits believe that Banishment destroys pieces of them. Perhaps it does – the red savages are different from us."

Alexandra frowned but didn't say anything. Old Colonials, especially old Old Colonials, tended to say things like that about Indians.

The warlock hung in the air, glowing a pearly white, with his voluminous, velvety robes billowing around him as if there were a breeze in the room. "I have thought about what you said, about your desire to fight the Deathly Regiment."

"Like you did," Alexandra said quietly.

"I was one of the first wizards born in the New World. The Deathly Regiment was conceived, debated, and sealed before I ever learnt of it. But..." He paused. "I wish I could tell you that I opposed it from the moment I did learn of it, but I did not. At first, I saw it as a necessary evil."

"A necessary evil!" Alexandra exclaimed. "Isn't human sacrifice 'savage'? I guess if one of your children had been chosen to be sacrificed, you would have still thought it was necessary?"

"No," Thorn said softly, "I did not."

Alexandra opened her mouth, and closed it again.

"Do you judge me, child? Your father was outraged when he first learnt of the Deathly Regiment, but he didn't rebel immediately."

"He thought the Wizards' Congress would end the Deathly Regiment."

"Yes."

"Why don't they?"

"Because the Wizards' Congress is dominated by the Elect, and the Elect believe that they've earned their privileges. Why do you suppose they resent half-bloods and Muggle-borns so?"

"Because they're stuck up and prejudiced."

"No, girl!" Absalom Thorn rose toward the ceiling, so as to tower over her. "Because the non-purebloods demand equal rights and privileges without sharing in the sacrifice. Until recently, none but the Elect knew about their sacrifices. Now there are half-bloods and Muggle-borns sitting in the Wizards' Congress, making laws and sharing the power that used to belong to purebloods alone, and none of them want to take part in the Deathly Regiment."

"Of course they don't. They want to abolish it."

"Is that what you believe?" Alexandra's ancestor descended a little closer to the floor, so that she wasn't forced to crane her head. "Yes, some do. But as your father will tell you, some think it fitting and proper that purebloods and purebloods alone continue to bear the sacrifice."

"Who would think that sacrificing children is okay? Even among the Elect?"

"Have you any idea what will be unleashed if they stop? Yes, yes, it's a terrible evil," the old wizard said, before Alexandra objected angrily again, "but it's not something that can simply be stopped without consequences. My great-great-great-grandson is a very persuasive, charismatic wizard, and quite adept at intimidation and extortion when persuasion fails, and even he couldn't gain enough support from his fellow Congressmen."

"There has to be a way."

"Perhaps." Absalom Thorn studied her. "You know far too much already, but not nearly enough to do anything. You know what will happen to you if you reveal what you know."

"Then it can't hurt me to know more."

"Most regrettably, you are wrong about that. And I am in peril if the Inquisitors find out I told you more."

"You died fighting the Deathly Regiment. Did you lose all your courage in death?"

Thorn's eyes flashed, literally, shining brightly in his face like flickering lightning. "Have a care how you address me, girl. You are still my progeny."

Alexandra gritted her teeth, reminding herself that she couldn't antagonize the elder Thorn while she was trying to get information from him. "I want to know the details about the Deathly Regiment – how it's done, how they choose, exactly what the Confederation gets by sacrificing children, how the Generous Ones are involved –"

"Wait." Thorn held up a hand. "How much do you know about oaths and oath-breaking? Magical seals? Realms and gates and doorways and shadows? Names, Powers, signs, and portents? You are in your fourth year of magical studies?"

"Yes."

"You know nothing. I was older than your father is now when I began my opposition. Your father was a brilliant wizard already at your age, and one of the most powerful in the world by the time he was elected to the Wizards' Congress. I have seen how rashly you throw yourself into whatever cause consumes you, daughter of Abraham. You think little and act recklessly. I see that scowl on your face, that indignant curl of your lip. You are fourteen, which you think is old enough. You will tell me that witches used to get married and start families at your age."

Alexandra hadn't been thinking any such thing, but she held her tongue, barely, as Absalom went on: "Valeria knows far more than

you, and she uncovered the secret of the Deathly Regiment without anyone telling her about it. She is a formidable witch, and had spent years studying before she came to me wanting to know more. You, Alexandra –" The ghost pointed a finger. "You are brave and talented, and I do believe your heart is true. But correct me if I am wrong, my descendant, because I know only what I have heard from you or Julia or your father, but every time you've undertaken some great cause, you've done so with little preparation or knowledge, and more often than not it's gone terribly awry, has it not?"

Alexandra's fingers curled into tight, hard fists.

Absalom Thorn said, "I will tell you everything I know when I am convinced that you are to be taken seriously and will not simply bring more misfortune and calamity upon yourself and others."

"How am I supposed to prove myself to you?" Alexandra asked, trying to keep her anger in check.

"I believe applying yourself diligently to your lessons would be an excellent start."

"I want to do something about the Confederation sacrificing children, and you're telling me to do my homework?"

"You certainly don't expect to accomplish anything if you are a poor student, do you?"

She glared at him. "My father would tell me."

The ghost was unperturbed. "If you swore yourself to his service, yes, I believe Abraham would make use of you."

Frustrated, she sat on her bed and reached out to stroke Charlie's feathers. "But you do support his cause. You've helped him."

"I feel a sense of obligation to all my descendants. And Abraham has picked up the torch that I let slip from my fingers. But sending a girl into the fray – no, you are too young. Devote yourself to your studies, and when you are a witch worthy of the name, come to me again and tell me what you want of me, and I will consider it." Absalom Thorn clasped his hands behind his back and regarded her

solemnly. "I would counsel you to abandon this cause. Let your father fight it."

"Thanks for the advice," she muttered.

"Why must you be so driven to folly and ruin, child?"

She said nothing.

Absalom Thorn glanced at the door, and Alexandra thought she heard shuffling outside. If the elves were eavesdropping, they'd hear nothing, thanks to her Muffliato spell, but they could see the light was still on under her door.

"It is time for me to go," the ghost said. When she still didn't answer, he sighed. "Farewell, daughter of Thorn. Until next time." He stepped through the exterior wall of her room, in the direction of the hillside sloping down into the woods.

Alexandra peeled off her robes and changed into pajamas, and then lay in her bed for a long time thinking before falling asleep.

As everyone sat down to breakfast the next morning to enjoy the house-elves' good-bye feast for Alexandra – berry scones, enormous orange and raisin muffins, plates of soufflés and sliced fruit, and fresh-squeezed orange and pumpkin juice, along with hot and iced tea – Ms. King announced that Julia would not accompany Alexandra to the airport.

Both girls stared at her, and Julia's face melted in disappointment. "Oh, Mother, that's not fair! To not let us say good-bye properly when I probably won't see my dear sister again for months and months?" She put an arm around Alexandra's shoulders. Alexandra was trying to keep her face impassive, though she was sorely disappointed as well. The scent of fresh baked muffins was no longer so mouth-watering.

Ms. King took a scone, while admonishing her daughter. "We'll go with Alexandra as far as New Roanoke. You will be able to say good-bye properly, before Alexandra takes the shuttle. There's no need for you to go with her, Julia, and frankly, it's the only punishment I can think of that will make an impression on both of

you. You still have a habit of not thinking through the consequences of your actions, Alexandra."

Julia said, "Alexandra couldn't have known that horrible woman was going to show up, and she saved her! It was Father's fault, really –"

Ms. King raised her voice to cut off further argument: "That will be enough, Julia! You wouldn't have been in that situation if you hadn't gone into the woods without my permission."

Julia looked hurt. Alexandra had never heard Ms. King sound so upset, not even after Alexandra had stolen a Time-Turner from Valeria while both of them were visiting Croatoa.

Ms. King buttered her scone with great care. She did not look at Alexandra or Julia, and there were lines in her face that Alexandra didn't remember seeing before.

Diana Grimm and our father were exchanging hexes down there. Julia could have been hurt. I took her to the same place Max took me... She had trouble swallowing her mouthful of soufflé.

"It's all right, Ms. King," she said softly. "I understand. I am sorry. I never meant to put Julia in any danger. I just... had to speak to him. I was going to go without telling Julia at all."

Ms. King stopped buttering her scone. "I hope you don't think that would have been the preferable option now?"

Alexandra cast her eyes down at her plate.

Ms. King sighed. "I know you didn't mean to put yourself or Julia in danger, Alexandra. But the consequences of your actions do not follow from your intentions. Now, eat your breakfast. You two still have the rest of the morning together, and a ride across the sound."

Samuel Hunter, the grizzled wizard who ran the Kings' winged horse ranch, was waiting with the Thestral-drawn carriage when Julia, Alexandra, and Ms. King emerged from the house with Alexandra's luggage and Charlie.

Already sitting in the back seat of the carriage was Myrta Applegate. Myrta was a stout, dour young woman, a Squib who lived in a cottage on the Kings' estate. She didn't smile or talk much.

"Oh, are you seeing Alexandra off, too, Myrta?" Julia asked.

Myrta looked at Alexandra and Julia with a flat expression. "No, I have some errands to run in New Roanoke. Ms. King said I could come along. Since you're going anyway, it's faster than taking the ferry."

The house-elves – Deezie, Nina, Olina, Gun-Gun, and Rolly – all assembled on the steps to say good-bye to Alexandra. She hugged each of them in turn.

"We hope Miss will be back soon," Nina said.

"The house is less emptier with Miss Julia's sister here," Olina said.

"Maybe our Misses' other sister will be back next time," Deezie said, and then squeaked as Olina poked her in the ribs and Nina said, "Ssh!" Deezie hung her head, blushing furiously.

"Maybe," Alexandra said. She gave Deezie another squeeze, then allowed Mr. Hunter to give her a hand up to the carriage, next to Julia.

Julia regained a bit of her cheer as they flew across the waves to New Roanoke and then set off down the road to Blacksburg. They talked about what they would do for the rest of the summer, the classes they were taking in the fall, and when they would see each other next. Julia was particularly excited to be taking Apparition classes with the other juniors at the Salem Witches' Institute. "And once I've got my license, I can come visit you," she said.

"And you can teach me how to Apparate," Alexandra said.

"She certainly will not," said Ms. King.

"You know you can't Apparate all the way to Central Territory," Mr. Hunter said from the front of the carriage. "Most wizards can't even Apparate from New Roanoke to Blacksburg."

Something niggled at Alexandra's mind then, but she forgot it when Julia asked if Alexandra was going to call Payton when she arrived home.

"Actually, he's supposed to call me," Alexandra said.

"Really?"

"That's how it works." She didn't add that all of her dating knowledge came from television and movies and bits of gossip overheard from other girls.

Julia pursed her lips. "Well, that seems unfair."

Alexandra supposed it was, if she were going to be sitting around staring at her phone waiting for Payton to call – which wasn't going to happen. She glanced at Myrta. Myrta had said nothing, and Alexandra wondered why the older girl never seemed interested in joining in any conversations. Even Mr. Hunter was chatting with Ms. King up in the front seat.

When they reached downtown New Roanoke, it was still mid-morning. Mr. Hunter brought them to a traffic circle near the Governor's mansion, where horse-drawn carriages mingled with an odd assortment of wizard automobiles. Along one small stretch of the circle, there were several haggard-looking winged horses hitched to black buggies, and behind them, a bright green van and an ancient yellow cab, all parked beneath a sign saying 'Taxi Stand.' The buggy drivers were standing off to the side, all wearing long black coats and stovepipe hats despite the sweltering heat, and hawking and spitting tobacco. An old man with long white hair braided in a ponytail sat behind the wheel of the cab. His head was inclined back against his headrest; he might have been dozing behind his sunglasses.

The buggy drivers swiveled their heads to look at them as Mr. Hunter pulled their carriage to a halt behind the automobiles. Everyone got off the carriage, and standing on the street, Julia embraced Alexandra.

"Oh, Alexandra! Take care, and enjoy the rest of your summer. And do stay out of trouble this year."

"I'll try," Alexandra said, hugging Julia back.

"Write often. Especially about Payton."

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

Julia pulled her closer, and whispered in her ear, "I love you."

Alexandra was still and silent for a moment. Those weren't words she heard – or said – often.

I never got a chance to say that to Max, she thought.

She murmured, "I love you, too."

Julia stepped away from her, moisture giving her eyes an extra sheen, and she smiled.

"Let me know if Valeria writes to you again," Alexandra said.

"Of course I will," Julia said.

Their older sister had yet to forgive Alexandra. Valeria had never responded to Alexandra's letter of apology. She had replied to Julia, but to Julia's gentle mention of how very bad their younger sister felt, Valeria had only replied: 'I hope Alexandra is well, and that whatever lesson she has learned about consequences will make a lasting impression on her.'

It was Valeria who had felt the consequences of Alexandra's actions most directly. Though she remained in Europe, she no longer worked for the Académie de Magie. Alexandra didn't expect Valeria to forgive her soon.

Alexandra turned to Ms. King. "Thank you for letting me visit again, Ms. King. And I am sorry about last night. You really shouldn't blame Julia."

"Julia is responsible for the choices she makes, as you are responsible for the choices you make." Ms. King held Alexandra out at arm's length, looking into her eyes with a serious expression. "Please be careful, my dear, especially where your father is

concerned." In a somewhat lighter tone, she added, "Don't force me and Julia to pay another visit to Larkin Mills."

Alexandra smiled. "I'd like it if Julia could visit some time for real."

Ms. King patted her cheek. "Perhaps someday. When I can trust her not to let you talk her into foolishness in her own home."

Julia pouted. From the cage at Alexandra's feet, Charlie squawked: "Troublesome!"

Alexandra picked Charlie's cage up and turned to the two wizard taxis. A witch dressed in New Colonial style, consisting of white robes with long trailing sleeves and a fanciful, stylized bonnet that was nothing like the plain ones Ozarkers wore, was already getting into the yellow cab. Ms. King walked over to the green van, which had 'Enchanted Roanoke Shuttle' painted on its side, and gave directions and money to the driver.

"Good-bye, Mr. Hunter, Myrta," Alexandra said.

Mr. Hunter said, "Good-bye, Miss Alex. Hope to see you soon." Myrta just nodded to her.

Alexandra boarded the van. The driver was a young black man wearing jeans, a faded t-shirt with the name of a wizard rock band printed on it, and a bowler. He tipped his hat to Ms. King, then gestured with it at his passengers. "Make sure your bird doesn't crap in my van," he said.

Alexandra just narrowed her eyes at him, while Charlie made a rude noise.

The driver ignored Alexandra for most of the trip. He listened to wrock music on the wizard wireless mounted in the dash panel of the van, and occasionally cursed at other drivers as he weaved between lanes.

"Muggles! They should just stay off the road," he muttered.

Alexandra clenched her teeth. "You do know that these are Muggle roads, right?"

The driver turned around to reply to her. "Well, they sure don't know how to drive on them."

"Look out!" Alexandra shouted, as the rear of a semi loomed ahead of them. The driver turned back around and yanked on the wheel, swerving around the back of the truck and speeding past it on the left, while behind them, cars honked angrily and brakes squealed. Charlie squawked.

"Don't worry," said the driver, "this vehicle has Anti-Collision Charms. It practically drives itself."

"No kidding," Alexandra said.

By the time they reached the airport, Alexandra had decided she preferred Apparition. It was less dangerous and not much less comfortable.

Water! she thought suddenly. It's hard to Apparate over water. That was one reason Ms. King had remained on Croatoa: an island was inconvenient to visit even for wizards. The water crossing might be no obstacle to Abraham Thorn, but had Diana Grimm actually Apparated back to the mainland?

Alexandra was lost in thought as she stepped onto the curb with her bag and Charlie's cage.

The driver said, "Hey, how about a tip?"

She scowled at him. "Here's a tip – learn to drive." Charlie jeered at him as she entered the airport.

Her flight from Chicago had been exciting, because it was the first time she'd ever been on an airplane. Her flight back to Chicago was cramped and boring. She reminded herself that Charlie was even more uncomfortable, stuffed into a cage down in the luggage compartment. She would rather have taken a Portkey home; that yank when you first touched the Portkey was something you never quite got used to, but it was over in a second, and then you were at your destination, instead of spending hours in the air and navigating crowded airport terminals.

However, Ms. King had paid for Alexandra's previous Portkey trips. Alexandra agreed with her mother that it wasn't right to continue taking advantage of Ms. King's generosity, and airplane tickets were cheaper than Portkeys, especially when you had to exchange dollars for Lions first.

Alexandra found the crowds at O'Hare Airport fascinating. She had been born in Chicago, but for as long as she could remember, home had been the small town of Larkin Mills. As she made her way from the gate to the baggage claim area where she could pick up Charlie, she watched the people hurrying all around her, lining up at the fast food concessions to get something to eat before boarding a plane, or clustered in the waiting areas around the gates. It seemed impossible that all of these people from around the country were so completely unaware of the wizarding world that coexisted with them. She wondered if she was the only witch in the airport, and how badly Muggles would freak out if they knew about witches and wizards walking among them. She'd carried her wand with her on the plane; both times through the security checkpoints, the agents operating the x-ray scanners hadn't even bothered to ask her about it. It was just a wooden stick.

Her mother was waiting for her just past the passenger debarkation point. Claudia Green was a tall woman with mousy brown hair, broad shoulders, and wide hips. About the only thing she had in common with her daughter was a disinclination to dress up. As Alexandra walked over to her, she wondered, not for the first time, what had attracted Abraham Thorn to such an ordinary Muggle woman. It was something neither of them ever talked about.

Her mother looked her over. "You got your ears pierced."

Alexandra nodded. "Julia talked me into it."

"You enjoyed your stay with the Kings, I take it? You never wrote."

"I talked to you on the phone every Saturday."

"You didn't tell me much."

Although her mother was beginning to accept her daughter's place in a world she wanted nothing to do with, talking about it still made

her uncomfortable. Alexandra knew this, which was why she didn't say much about it.

"I was usually around M— other people when I called," she said. "Do you want to hear about the Magibotanical Gardens and the pirate ghost fleet?"

She knew she shouldn't be talking about things like this now, in the middle of the airport, but no one was paying attention to them.

Her mother forced a smile. "Maybe later." She reached out to push the hair back from Alexandra's ear and examine the tiny earring Alexandra had fixed there. "I'm glad you're back," she murmured.

"I missed you, too," Alexandra said. "I also got a tattoo."

"What?" Her mother jerked her hand back and stared at her.

"Just kidding." Alexandra gave her a little grin. "Come on — we have to pick up Charlie at the cargo office." She led the way to the escalator, while her mother shook her head.

Not Clever Enough

Alexandra came downstairs the next morning with Nigel, her pet snake. Her mother had already left for work. Her stepfather was sitting at the kitchen table in his gray police uniform, with waffles, eggs, coffee, and the morning newspaper in front of him.

He frowned at the snake wrapped around Alexandra's wrist. "I thought we agreed that thing stays in its cage."

Alexandra poured herself a bowl of cereal. "Nigel's kind of sluggish. You did feed him every week like you were supposed to, didn't you?"

"Yes. It wasn't sluggish when it coiled up and hissed at me. I dumped the worms into its cage. If it didn't eat them, that's the damn snake's problem."

The little brown snake's tongue flicked out, tasting the air, as if trying to pinpoint the source of Archie's rumbling voice. Nigel wasn't a sociable pet like Charlie, but Alexandra felt quite protective of her second familiar, whom she had rescued from the Mors Mortis Society and John Manuelito two years earlier.

Archie downed the last of his coffee and rose, putting his broad, campaign-style police hat on his head. "I'll be on patrol today, so don't call me unless it's an emergency. Leave a message with your mother at the hospital if you go anywhere."

"Yes, Archie," Alexandra said in an I-know-that-why-are-you-telling-me-again? tone. Despite her eye-rolling, she was glad that her parents had decided she could be left home alone without supervision. There had been no talk of sending her to camp, and it was too late for her to enroll in summer classes at Larkin Mills High School.

After her stepfather left, Alexandra finished her breakfast while lying on the couch in the living room watching TV.

By mid-morning, she had dozed off. The shows she'd watched when she was younger no longer interested her. Cartoons about witches and ninjas and pirates bored her. Dramas and sitcoms about

teenagers made her feel uncomfortable, as if she were looking in on a world that was receding away from her more and more every year.

She sat up with a start when her cell phone jingled. For a moment, she felt alarm when she realized Nigel was no longer wrapped around her wrist. Then she felt scales sliding against her belly. She reached under her shirt to drag the snake out while reaching for the phone with her other hand. Nigel twisted in her grasp and actually opened his mouth, but she ignored the snake's irritation as she checked her phone. She expected it to be Payton, and for a moment, she was disappointed when she saw that it was David Washington, the only friend of hers from school who also had a cell phone.

The flash of disappointment irritated her. She was not waiting for Payton to call! She pressed the talk button. "Hey. What's up?"

"What's up with you?" David's voice sounded a little deeper than the last time she'd spoken to him.

"I'm back in Larkin Mills, obviously. You still taking summer classes?" Like her, David had Muggle parents, and they insisted he continue his 'Muggle' education alongside his wizarding studies.

"Yeah. English is okay. I hate math. Um, have you seen the news?"

"The news?" Alexandra looked at the television, which was showing reruns of some stupid show about rich teenagers in New York City.

"In Louisiana," David said.

"You mean the oil spill? I heard about that."

"I mean right now."

She flipped the channels until she came to a news station, which was showing live coverage from Louisiana. A reporter in a yellow raincoat was holding a microphone while wind gusted around her; behind her was an enormous green-black puddle met at the horizon by roiling black storm clouds. 'Death toll rises as a result of freakish weather' said the banner scrolling along the bottom of the screen. 'Missing communities still mystify authorities.'

"What's going on in Louisiana?" Alexandra asked.

"Weird stuff. Magical stuff."

"Freak storms aren't necessarily magic."

"Two whole towns have disappeared. Little tiny ones, but that's a few hundred people, just gone. FEMA and them think it was freak tornadoes."

Alexandra looked past the reporter on the screen at the turbulent swamp water behind her.

"I got a couple letters from Angelique this summer," David went on. "She said a lot of ghosts have been stirred up in the Territory, and other things, too. Will-o-wisps, vampires, Dementors... They're putting extra security around Baleswood, and the Louisiana Regiment has been mustered."

"Sounds like a lot of panic over some freak storms," Alexandra said. But unease snaked around her gut. "Aren't there always rumors of Dark Arts and undead down there?"

"Angelique says it's more than usual."

"And Angelique is such a reliable source."

David ignored that. "They're saying the Dark Convention is gathering."

"'They' say. Who's 'they'? What does that even mean, 'the Dark Convention is gathering'? You don't think I know anything about this, do you?"

There was a pause. "No. 'Course not. Just thought... you know. You might have heard something."

"From my father? Did someone ask you to ask me?"

"What? No! What the heck are you talking about?" David's tone became angry. "What's your problem, Alex?"

Alexandra relaxed her tight grip on the phone. David was naturally inquisitive, finding everything about the wizarding world fascinating.

He hadn't really experienced how dangerous it was the way she had. The fact that Alexandra was the daughter of a Dark Wizard was probably just another story he told his parents, like house-elves and Quidditch.

"Sorry," she said. "But I get that a lot, you know."

David made a snorting noise at the other end.

She tried to change the subject. "How's Angelique?"

There was another long silence. Finally, David answered: "She isn't coming back to Charmbridge."

"What?" Alexandra felt Nigel squirming in her hand, and realized her grip had tightened on the poor creature. With an apologetic look she knew the snake couldn't possibly read, she loosened her grasp. Nigel's head swiveled around to stare at her with what she imagined was an accusing expression.

"She, uh, well, her parents think Charmbridge is too... dangerous. And it's hard for her... you know."

Darla Dearborn had been Angelique Devereaux's roommate and best friend. Alexandra knew the other girl had been terribly distraught over Darla's death.

It made her sad that Angelique would not be returning to Charmbridge. She and Angelique had never been close, but she would miss the witch from New Orleans. Charmbridge Academy wouldn't be the same without the two spoiled pureblood girls who'd been her sometimes-friends, sometimes-antagonists since sixth grade.

"Sorry" was all she could say. David and Angelique had started dating last year. He would miss Angelique more than she would.

They talked for a few more minutes, about David's father's football team and the classes they were taking this year. Alexandra was surprised to learn that David had exchanged several letters with Constance and Forbearance over the summer. Maybe he asked them for girl advice, she thought, amused.

After they ended their conversation, Alexandra watched the news channel a little while longer, then said to Nigel, "I can't waste the rest of my summer watching TV."

Nigel's tongue flicked in and out, but the snake offered no comment.

The Dark Convention is gathering. Alexandra couldn't put these events together, but she had a feeling that sooner or later, they would have some significance to her. Meanwhile, her own time was ticking away. And what was she doing about it?

Absalom Thorn's words came back to her: Your father was a brilliant wizard already at your age. Alexandra had proven herself a talented witch, especially when it came to dueling, but no one thought of her as brilliant. And there was so much she wanted to learn.

She had only a few schoolbooks at home, and a SPAWN study guide she hadn't opened all summer. Studying magic while being unable to perform it only frustrated her. She'd been threatened with probation, expulsion from Charmbridge, or worse if she was caught doing magic at home again.

But a lot of the Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge was not spellcasting, but magical theory, Arithmancy, potion ingredients and alchemical formulas... things Alexandra would have to master. She went upstairs and put Nigel back in his terrarium, setting the snake atop the magical warming rock, and took out her books. With a sigh, she opened them and began reading.

Payton called the next day. Alexandra was pleased, but he wasn't interested in discussing books or classes, and when Alexandra talked about SPAWNs and magical theory and alchemy, he said something about his girlfriend being a 'wurm.' A little nonplussed at being called his girlfriend, she decided not to bring up magical studies anymore. Payton continued to call every other day. She enjoyed talking to him, but rarely remembered much about what they talked about.

When Anna called her later that week from a pay phone in San Francisco, Alexandra asked her to send some of her Advanced Magical Theory notes and study guides from last year.

Alexandra no longer had any friends in Larkin Mills, so letters and emails from her school friends were more welcome than they knew. An owl from the Pritchards arrived within days of her return, telling her that their younger sister Innocence was 'much improved' since the traumatic events of a few months ago.

The barn owl that brought their letter also carried one from Innocence. The younger girl's letter, written in large, loopy handwriting, was much longer than her sisters'. It went on for several pages about the Pritchards' homestead and their goats and pigs, and the magical soap and small charms and blessings the Ozarkers produced as part of their livelihood. She complained about babysitting her younger brother and sister while Constance and Forbearance got to go into the woods with the Grannies, and talked about next year's Jubilee, some sort of Ozarker festival held every seven years.

It was a rambling account of Ozarker life which amused and baffled Alexandra by turns. Why was Innocence telling her all this? At the very end, Innocence wrote:

'I hope you are recovered and feeling in mighty high spirits, since you spent the summer with your sister, who I'm sure is sweet and lovely and not bossy and mean like some sisters are (sometimes). I know things been mighty rough for you, Alex, but I won't never forget how you saved my life. You are the bravest girl ever and we even said so to Pa, too! So don't worry none about us not coming back to Charmbridge cause we pitched a row and threatened to mope and wheeze til the end of time if our folks kept us home, and even the Rashes said they thought Constance and Forbearance ought to finish educating. (They don't care none bout me course but that's fine cause I don't give a lick bout them neither!) I am praying you have peace and joy and all nice things, and so is Connie and Forbearance.

Love,

Innocence

(P.S. I don't have a crush on David no more so if you and him start courting I won't mind.)

(P.P.S. I know a secret!)

"What?" Alexandra said aloud. She shook her head and put the letter in her desk drawer.

"I'm going to the library," she said to her familiars. Charlie fluttered back to the comfortable cage by her bed. Nigel did not respond. She sent a text message to her mother, and set off for the place where she had spent so many afternoons back in the days when she was a year-round resident of Larkin Mills.

Though it was sunny, dark clouds were beginning to cover part of the sky, and Alexandra could hear distant rumblings of thunder. The library was only a few blocks from her house, so she increased her pace. She walked down Sweetmaple Avenue, crossed the main intersection at Adams Street and cut across the park. She was almost to the far side when she heard a catcall, followed by someone saying in a voice just loud enough to be heard across the grass: "Freak."

Three boys and two girls were sitting at one of the picnic benches, next to an old barbecue grill. She recognized the boys, but it was the younger of the two girls who caught her attention.

"Keep walking, you weird freak!" yelled one of the boys. It was Billy Boggleston, of course. He'd been a thorn in her side for as long as she'd lived in Larkin Mills: a bully all through elementary school, and an annoyance even when she was home over school breaks.

Alexandra stalked over to their table. There was a smoky haze around them. Billy sucked on his cigarette, then flicked it into the cold ashes of the barbecue grill and rose slowly to his feet. He had always been a large boy, but now he looked several years older than he was, taller than Alexandra and much broader and heavier.

Alexandra ignored Billy and focused her gaze on the two girls. One of them was her age. Alexandra vaguely remembered her as a former classmate in elementary school, though she was almost unrecognizable now: torn jeans and a midriff-baring shirt, spiked hair, glittering pins through her ears, and a bright kabuki mask of makeup. She was sitting on the table with her feet planted on the bench. She gave Alexandra an insincere smile. "Hi, Alexandra."

Alexandra nodded and looked at the other girl, the younger one sitting at the end of the picnic bench: Bonnie Seabury.

Bonnie lived down the street from her on Sweetmaple Avenue. Her older brother, Brian, had been Alexandra's best friend once. In the days before Alexandra had gone away to Charmbridge Academy, before their friendship had ended, Bonnie had often accompanied the two of them when Brian was stuck looking after his younger sister. It was, indirectly, because of Bonnie that Alexandra and Brian were no longer friends. Bonnie had seen too much of magic, much more than she should have, and more than Brian could bear.

But now she was sitting on a picnic bench with boys three years older than her, boys who had always tormented and bullied her and her brother alike. Bonnie wasn't dressed up and preening like the other girl, but she was wearing lip gloss and a bit of inexpertly applied eyeshadow, and large, dangly earrings.

"What are you doing with these creeps?" Alexandra asked.

"Creeps?" Billy snorted. Gordie Pike and Tom Gavin made little 'ohs' with their mouths and slapped the table.

The girl with the torn jeans and spiked hair took a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket and offered it to Alexandra. "Smoke?"

"No thanks." Alexandra didn't look at her. Her eyes were fixed on the nervous but defiant Bonnie.

"I'm just hanging out," Bonnie said.

"Do your parents know who you're hanging out with?"

"She's just hanging out," Billy said. Tom and Gordie chortled. They exchanged glances as if they were sharing a private joke.

"You're not the boss of me," Bonnie said.

"Yeah, freak, you're not the boss of her," Billy repeated. Tom and Gordie snickered. Amused, the girl on the table took another drag from her cigarette.

Alexandra gave Bonnie a long, slow stare, until Bonnie's eyes dropped.

"You're right, I'm not," Alexandra said. She shrugged, then turned to Billy, her eyes hardening. "But if you call me a freak again, I'll show you something freaky."

Billy's face twitched, then he screwed it up in an angry glower. "Show me what, freak?"

She stepped up to him until they were almost nose to nose – or rather, nose to neck, as Billy was now a good several inches taller than her.

She lowered her voice. "You really are pretty stupid, aren't you?"

"What are you going to do, witch?" he said. "Turn me into a frog?"

He had apparently gotten braver as he'd grown larger. Alexandra could feel her wand, inches from her fingers. But to draw it and curse Billy would be foolish. Satisfying and easy, but wrong... and illegal. How many times had she acted on impulse and regretted it? Even the accidental spells – worms coming out of noses, tainted food, ponds turning to blood – had gotten her in trouble.

She let out a long, slow breath, and with her cheeks burning, she turned away from him. He laughed.

You have no idea what I could do to you, she thought, but though she tried to content herself with that, the knowledge gave her little pleasure as Tom and Gordie and the older girl joined in the laughter.

Bonnie looked at her uncertainly. Alexandra wondered if the younger girl wanted to laugh at her, too, or if she was disappointed at not seeing her do something to Billy.

"That's right – take off, freak!" Billy said.

"Shut up," Alexandra said.

Billy shoved her from behind, his flat palm slapping against her shoulder blade hard enough to make her stagger and step forward to regain her balance.

She turned back around. "Don't touch me."

His hand reached out to shove her again, this time in the chest. Flushing with anger, she slapped his hand away and shoved him back. He barely moved, and when he returned her shove, he sent her sprawling on the grass. Tom and Gordie hooted with laughter. Alexandra rolled to her feet and launched herself at Billy.

Billy was startled by her assault. Her head caught him in the chest and this time he did fall backward, with Alexandra on top of him. The air in his lungs came out with a 'whoof' as he landed on his back and Alexandra began pummeling him.

Then his fist lashed out and caught her under the chin. While she reeled, he rolled over on top of her. She tried to punch him, but he caught both of her wrists in his hands while sitting on her stomach. She struggled, but he was stronger. Billy laughed, and Alexandra's anger turned into white-hot fury. She smelled smoke and felt heat rising from her, and for a moment, Billy's expression turned to one of alarm.

Then someone slammed into him and he tumbled off of her. Alexandra sat up to see Billy rolling on the grass with someone else.

"Brian!" cried Bonnie, leaping to her feet. Tom and Gordie were also on their feet, moving toward the two scuffling boys.

Billy already had his hands around Brian's neck. Brian's arms flailed helplessly, trying to push the bigger boy away from him. Alexandra intercepted Tom as he was about to pile onto Brian as well, and gave him a shove that sent him stumbling backward. She faced Gordie, who looked at her uncertainly. Behind Gordie and Tom, the girl with the cigarette had not moved from the table; she was watching the fight with wide eyes.

Bonnie ran at Billy, but Tom caught her and lifted her off the ground, with her feet kicking in the air. She screamed and Alexandra lunged at Tom, before Gordie grabbed Alexandra's arm and spun her around. Alexandra's fist came around as well and struck Gordie in the side of the head. He yelped and punched her back, and for the second time, Alexandra stumbled dizzily.

I'll curse all of you! she thought, blinded by rage as much as by Gordie's blow, and then a 'Whoop-whoop-whoop!' sound cut through the commotion, and everyone jerked their heads around.

"Oh, crap," said Billy, still squatting on Brian, as a police SUV turned off the street, drove over the curb, and came right across the grass toward them. It rolled to an abrupt halt just outside the picnic area. The driver's door opened, and Sergeant Archie Green stepped out.

"What the hell do you kids think you're doing?" he demanded.

Everyone began shouting at once, Alexandra and Billy loudest of all, until Alexandra's stepfather held his hands up and said, "Quiet!"

The teenagers all fell silent. Archie glared at them.

"Brawling like a bunch of gangsters right in the middle of the park," he said. "I should take you all downtown and lock you up and make your parents come get you."

"I didn't do anything!" said the girl sitting on the table. She hadn't moved from where she was sitting.

Archie narrowed his eyes at her. "Put out that cigarette."

Sullenly, she stubbed it out against the wooden surface of the table.

"You four," Archie said, pointing at Billy, Tom, Gordie, and the girl, "get out of here. If I see any of you loitering in this park again, I will take you to the station and call your parents. You three –" He pointed at Alexandra, Brian, and Bonnie, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Get in the vehicle." He paused. "What did you do to the grass?"

Alexandra looked down at her feet. The grass was blackened and smoldering in a spreading circle around her. Even as she stared, a few more blades at the edge of the circle charred and withered.

"Nothing," she said. Her voice sounded hollow in her ears. Everyone else was staring at her with fear, suspicion, and amazement. Little wisps of smoke rose from the earth, joining the smoke from one of the boys' discarded cigarette butts.

"Freak," Billy muttered.

"I said get out of here!" Archie snapped at him. He looked at Alexandra again, and repeated the gesture toward the SUV. Alexandra followed Brian and Bonnie and opened the front passenger's side door as the Seaburys slid into the back seat. Bonnie was sniffing now.

"Buckle your seat belts and keep your mouths shut," Archie said, and threw the SUV into reverse. He backed across the sidewalk and over the curb into the street, and then turned toward Sweetmaple Avenue, as thunder rumbled overhead and rain began to fall.

Alexandra was grounded. She hadn't bothered trying to defend herself. Archie didn't care. He'd taken Brian and Bonnie home, delivering them to a tight-lipped Mrs. Seabury, who curtly beckoned them inside and then nodded politely to Sergeant Green and thanked him. He tipped his hat and turned away, stepping off her porch to walk back to the SUV in their driveway, where Alexandra sat sullenly with her arms folded across her chest. Mrs. Seabury looked directly at her for a moment, with a stern, disapproving expression, and then she disappeared back into her house, closing the door firmly.

After that, Archie dropped Alexandra off at home and told her she wasn't to leave the house. That evening, he and Claudia listened as Alexandra explained her version of events, and then they told her she was grounded for a week.

Just before she went to bed, her mother asked her if she was all right.

"No, I'm grounded," Alexandra said. "When it wasn't even my fault."

"Are you all right?" her mother repeated, and though she was angry at being grounded, Alexandra sensed genuine concern, and tried to answer without sounding sulky.

"I'm fine, Mom."

Her mother looked doubtful.

"Really," Alexandra said. It was almost true.

Her mother nodded uncertainly. "You'll tell me if something is really bothering you, right?"

My father is going to start a war with the Confederation. I have seven years to live. What good would telling her mother that do?

"If I need to talk, I'll tell you." When her mother's expression softened, Alexandra asked, "Am I still grounded?"

"Yes." Her mother smiled and patted her cheek, which did nothing to make Alexandra less sullen.

The next day, her parents were already at work when she got up. Being grounded wasn't such a burden, since the storm that had rolled in the previous afternoon was lingering, pelting Larkin Mills with heavy rain and occasional flashes of lightning. Alexandra sat at her desk with a Wand-Ready™ SPAWN Study Guide in front of her, while Charlie sat on the windowsill and preened in front of the glass.

'Proper spells satisfy the requirements of being Principled, Repeatable, and Universal,' she read. 'A spell that does not satisfy each of these three requirements may be effective under certain circumstances, but as this sort of magic is restricted to specialists in post-secondary education, such spells and variant magical practices are not covered in the SPAWN curriculum.'

There was a lot of magic that didn't get taught in school, Alexandra knew. Her teachers usually dismissed 'conjuring' and other 'non-standard wizarding practices' as primitive, unreliable and dangerous, yet that didn't prevent other wizarding Cultures from using them.

She looked out the window at the sky as lightning crackled overhead. According to weather reports, most of the state was currently under cloud cover, and the storm would remain active until late in the afternoon.

The Trace Office tracked underage wizards and witches living in Muggle communities with scrying magic, but Valeria had told her last year that scrying didn't work very well through a storm.

To test this, Alexandra had transformed Charlie's cage into an animated wicker basket earlier that morning. It was a moderately challenging Transfiguration. Turning the cage into a wicker basket was easy, and appropriate for her grade level. Causing the basket to sprout legs and walk around the room like a big wicker spider was more difficult, but still something that she could claim to be doing as practice for her SPAWN.

She had been waiting for an owl to arrive with either a warning from the Trace Office or a Howler. It had been two hours, and so far there had been no response. Maybe the Trace Office had not detected her infraction, or maybe the rain was just delaying the owl.

The basket bumped against her leg, and she kicked it into a corner, where it squirmed and wiggled its wicker legs like an overturned turtle, trying to right itself.

She pointed her wand at the window and said, "Alohomora." The window flew open. Charlie squawked in protest as rain gusted in, then flapped to the other side of the room. Alexandra leaned out, half-expecting to see an owl winging its way toward her open window. All she saw were the wet rooftops and her neighbors' backyards.

She shut the window and resumed studying.

By that evening, the sky had cleared, but no owl arrived. The next day, an owl did arrive, but it was from Julia. It labored with the tightly-wrapped bundle it was carrying, and snapped its beak angrily when Alexandra gave it only one owl treat. It looked at Charlie hungrily until Alexandra offered it several more to go away.

'Dear Alexandra,' Julia wrote, 'I have enclosed the study guide you requested, though I must admit to some misgivings. I know you told me you just want to understand the theory behind Apparition, and I know, dear sister, that you will not get yourself into trouble by doing anything dangerous and illegal. Nonetheless, I'm quite sure Mother would not approve. So for my sake (because if anything were to happen, you know Mother will find out about it) please don't do anything foolish.'

Alexandra opened the guide that came with Julia's letter: 'Before You Apparate: What You Need to Know Before You Go.'

Underneath this and the seal of the Department of Magical Transportation was written: 'A study guide for juveniles aged 16 years and older. No exercises in this book shall be undertaken without adult supervision in an approved course of study. Further Territorial restrictions may apply.'

Alexandra smiled, then noticed Julia's P.S.: 'I really mean it, Alexandra! You could get hurt trying to Apparate on your own. Please be careful.'

Poor Julia. She tried to be a responsible older sister, but she chafed enough under her own restrictions that Alexandra found it too easy to talk her into helping her younger sister break the rules. What did Julia think she was going to do?

It was almost three weeks before another summer storm came to Larkin Mills. Alexandra had been checking weather reports eagerly each morning, and when the forecast called for thunder and rain at the end of the week, she began checking hourly, knowing how inaccurate Muggle weather forecasts could be. She wished she could afford a Weatherglobe, like the ones for sale in the Goblin Market.

Thursday morning, she woke to rain rattling against her window and a black sky outside. The weather was perfect.

"Want to go out, Charlie?" she asked.

The raven refused to untuck its head from beneath its wing.

"Stay here, then." Alexandra rummaged through her closet until she found her raincoat. It was bright yellow and several years old. It only reached down to her knees and looked like something a younger girl would wear. Frowning, she tossed it on the floor, and took out her red all-weather cloak instead. A little strange for wearing around a Muggle neighborhood, but who else would be out in weather like this? She shrugged it on and went downstairs to grab a bagel for breakfast, and stopped when she found her stepfather drinking coffee at the kitchen table, wearing a bathrobe.

"You're not going to work," she said.

"Day off, and damn good thing, too." He grunted and gestured outside. "I tried to talk your mother into calling in sick, but she's already at the hospital." He eyed Alexandra in her long, red cloak. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out."

"In this weather?"

She started to tell him she was going to the library, but remembered that the library wasn't open yet. She floundered, trying to think of a credible reason to go out in the middle of a rainstorm. "I'm just going to Brian's house."

Archie paused, with his coffee cup in front of his face. "You finally made up?"

Alexandra didn't know why Archie said 'finally,' and she was surprised and annoyed that he was even aware of whether or not she was friends with Brian.

"Yes," she mumbled, flushing in irritation at the clumsy lie.

Archie's heavy brow furrowed. "His mother is home, isn't she?"

"Of course she's home. She's always home." Mrs. Seabury was a housewife. She'd often babysat Alexandra as a child, though Alexandra suspected grudgingly; Mrs. Seabury had never liked her, though she'd never been mean to her. Alexandra fished in her pocket and held up her cell phone. "I'll have my phone with me, okay?"

"Well, all right." Archie squinted at her cloak. "What is that?"

"A cloak," she said. "Doesn't it look cool?"

"If you say so."

Alexandra snatched a bagel and a trail mix bar and left the house, pushing the door shut and grimacing as the rain hit her full force when she stepped off the porch. She glanced over her shoulder and wondered if Archie would be watching out the kitchen window. Just in case, she walked down the street toward Brian's house, in the

opposite direction from Old Larkin Pond. She passed the Seaburys' house, circled around the block, and on the next street over continued into the seedier neighborhood of Old Larkin. Only a few cars went by, and hardly anyone was out in the bad weather. A couple of people gave the teenage girl in the long cloak odd looks, but no one bothered her, and soon she had reached the underpass that went beneath the Interstate. The tunnel was dank and dripping, and as she proceeded down it, she saw small furry shapes scurrying away from her.

On the other side of the Interstate that ran along the southeast border of Larkin Mills was a long stretch of sloped fields and woodland, too uneven to make good farmland and so far untouched by development. Just out of sight of the highway was a small, brackish pond surrounded by cattails and weeds and thick brush. It was a smelly, muddy spot, but nonetheless Alexandra could see evidence of other people who'd been there: cigarette wrappers, bottles, and other trash. On a day like today, though, she expected Old Larkin Pond to be deserted, and it was. Normally she would have preferred to have Charlie with her to warn of anyone approaching, but she couldn't blame the bird for not wanting to fly in this weather.

Though she stood in the middle of a thunderstorm, her magical cloak and mud-repelling boots kept her mostly dry. All around her, weeds that had grown tall over the summer were being whipped by the wind and pressed to the ground by the rain. The wind also whipped her hair and made her cloak billow around her with the sound of a flag snapping in the breeze. Lightning struck somewhere close enough for the clap of thunder to deafen her for a moment. She eyed the nearest trees, twenty yards away, and decided to stay where she was.

With the toe of her boot, she dragged a crude, muddy circle in the greenish-yellow grass, then walked ten paces away and turned to face it. She could barely see the marks she'd made, and the rain would soon obscure them, but it gave her a point to concentrate on.

The study guide Julia had sent her talked about the basic mechanics of Apparating, but only a little about the theory behind it. Still, Alexandra didn't see how it could be that hard if any sixteen-year-old wizard could do it. Her problem was the need to improvise what she hadn't been trained to do formally. She'd improvised magic before –

what her teachers called 'doggerel verse,' little rhymes she had composed to create her own spells before she'd ever heard of the wizarding world. She'd made things disappear or summoned them to her hand, transformed objects, opened locks, made her room hotter or colder... she even had a vague recollection of making the car stop once while her mother was driving, when she was younger and probably hadn't even learned to rhyme yet.

Every magical child performed acts of spontaneous magic when they were young and wandless, feats they might not be able to duplicate until they were fully-trained wizards. It was one of the ironies of magic, Alexandra thought: you had to go to school for years to learn to do things you did accidentally before you'd learned anything. But in comparing notes with her friends about their childhoods, few of them had ever tried to do magic deliberately before they were old enough. Apparently, when you were raised among wizards you just accepted that you might manage to do magic accidentally now and then, but you couldn't cast a spell on purpose except by luck. Not until you had a wand.

Except Alexandra had cast a lot of spells on purpose before she'd had a wand. Not all of them had worked, but she had learned to use 'doggerel verse' and continued to use it even after going to Charmbridge, despite teachers telling her that it would hinder her ability to learn magic 'properly.' She had yet to find that that was true.

She didn't know if she could Apparate with doggerel verse, but she hadn't found any theoretical reason why not. All it took was 'Destination, Determination, and Deliberation.'

She stared at the muddy circle in the grass, and concentrated, trying to feel every molecule of her body, placing herself in that little circle just a few steps away, imagining the space between to be an illusion, an obstacle no different than jumping over a chalk mark on the sidewalk, or jumping off the roof of her house when she was seven.

She chanted:

"I can go when I want.

I can go where I want.

I can go how I want.

Destination in my mind's eye,

Determination not to die,

Deliberation, before I fly...

Apparate!"

She blinked rapidly. She'd felt nothing. She looked down at her feet, and up again.

She hadn't moved.

Was it the rhyme? Magic didn't depend on the literal meaning of words, but maybe there just hadn't been enough of the 'three Ds' in her poem. The Apparition study guide had included exercises for fixing the three Ds in your mind. She didn't see how her destination could have been off; she was staring right at it. Had she not been determined enough? Had she not deliberated long enough?

She tried again, though she knew from experience that a reused rhyme almost never worked. Nothing happened.

Well, she'd known she might not succeed on her first attempt. That was why she'd composed several rhymes. She created new destinations: a pyramid of small stones she piled next to the water, an 'X' made of sticks laid carefully in the mud, and an impromptu heptagon she created by dragging seven fallen branches from a copse of trees and laying them end to end in the grass. Each time, she stood a few paces away and tried a new rhyme, holding her wand tightly but making no gestures with it.

Nothing happened; she might as well have been a Muggle.

After an hour, water was seeping beneath her magic cloak, and she was getting very wet and terribly frustrated. Why wasn't it working?

As she stood there, with her wand at her side and an expression to match the drizzle and thunder around her, she heard a voice call, "Alexandra!"

She turned her head, startled. A figure in a dark red raincoat was moving along the trodden path through the grass from the freeway underpass down to the pond. She saw a bit of blond hair under the hood of the raincoat, and her mouth dropped open.

Brian?

What was he doing here? Was he nuts? Go away! she thought fiercely, clenching her wand. Go away! Go away!

When he kept coming, she wished for him to turn around or walk past her, then, desperately, that she could disappear back to her own home before he saw her.

She disappeared.

With a wrenching twist much worse than any time she'd been taken somewhere via Side-Along Apparition or Portkey, she reappeared high off the ground, wedged against the trunk of a tree with only a thick branch beneath her. The tree was just up the hill from the pond, and Brian was pushing his way through the grass to the muddy clearing where she'd just been standing.

Fiery pain erupted from her knees, and she gasped and clutched at them. They felt odd, and when she tried to shift her position, her legs bent the wrong way, causing another flare of pain. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. Then she saw bloody red smears across her knees where she'd just grabbed them. She held up her hands. The fingers of her right hand were still curled around her wand, but the fingers of her left were splayed open.

"Aaaah!" she exclaimed.

Her fingertips were missing – all of them. Everything above the third joint of all ten fingers was gone, and from the severed ends, blood was oozing – not spurting or gushing, as if her fingertips had been sliced off, but welling up slowly, forming glistening red bubbles.

She slipped and tried to wrap her oddly-bending legs around the branch. Light-headed with shock and pain, she desperately wanted to Apparate back to the ground.

"Alexandra!" Brian shouted.

Damn him! He'd heard her cry. Had he actually seen her disappear?

"Go away!" she shouted, as he began running up the slope toward the tree where she was perched. She slipped some more and clutched at the branch with her free hand, her shortened fingers scraping painfully against it. She gulped, and chanted another charm she'd composed ahead of time:

"I shall not fear,

I shall not fail,

I shall not fall..."

She fell.

She was almost thirty feet up. She hit the ground with a crack that made her black out.

She couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few seconds, because when she opened her eyes again, Brian was kneeling over her.

"Oh my God," he said. "Alexandra!" His hands were hovering over her, as if he wanted to do something but was afraid to touch her. His face was pale.

"Go... away," she mumbled. Her legs hurt worse than before. She rolled over, and bit down to keep from screaming as the bones in her right arm ground together and sent white-hot pain through the limb. Her head and neck also hurt. Amazingly, her wand lay by her hand, unbroken. Water was dripping from the tree and soaking her and Brian.

Brian's eyes widened when he saw the blood trailing from her fingertips.

"I-I-I don't have a phone," he stammered. "I'll go for help."

"No!" she said. It was irrational – what else could she do but let someone come get her? She certainly wasn't going to stand up and

walk away from here. Maybe she could Apparate home. She laughed, causing Brian to stare at her fearfully.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, through clenched teeth.

He didn't seem sure how to respond. "Just lie there – I'll run, fast – I'll flag down someone on the Interstate –"

"No!" she repeated, and grabbed the front of his raincoat. He looked down in horror at the bloody stumps of her fingers. She let go of his coat, and lay back on the wet ground. She was beginning to shiver.

"Maybe I could carry you," he suggested.

"I have a cell phone," Alexandra said.

"What?" Brian gaped. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Because she's a foolish, stubborn girl."

Brian jumped. Alexandra twisted in pain, while Brian rose to his feet and faced the woman in the long black overcoat who had come up behind him.

"Please, ma'am, we need help," Brian said. "My friend's been hurt –"

"Yes, I can see that." The woman had no umbrella, but the wide black witch's hat on her head was keeping the rain off her head. Her hands were in the pockets of her coat. She withdrew one, and beckoned at Brian. "Come here, young man." Her other hand stayed in her pocket.

"Leave him alone!" Alexandra said. Both the woman and Brian turned to stare at her.

Diana Grimm smiled at her. "Alexandra, you need to lie still." Her voice was calm, but there was a warning glimmer in her eye.

"You... know each other?" Brian said.

Alexandra said, "Brian, get out of here. Now."

"What?" He looked increasingly confused. Alexandra felt a flash of anger accompanying the pain. Why couldn't he just do as he was told?

"That's right, Brian," Ms. Grimm said. She turned to him. "Go home. Everything is fine. I'll take care of Alexandra. She's in no danger. You should just go home and not worry anyone by mentioning this."

Brian blinked. "Okay." He looked at Alexandra again. "Are you sure?"

Alexandra stared at him, and then gave Ms. Grimm a searing look. "What –?"

"Tell him it will be all right, Alexandra," Ms. Grimm said. "Do you really want to complicate this situation further?"

Alexandra was shivering, and she was soaked to the skin now.

"It'll be all right," she said, in a trembling voice. "Go home, Brian. I'll be fine." She had no idea if that was true, but Ms. Grimm was right – this was already a bad situation, and Brian staying here, or calling her stepfather and bringing him here, could only make it worse.

Brian nodded. "Okay," he said reluctantly. "I'll see you later, I guess."

He turned and trudged away. Neither Alexandra nor Diana Grimm said anything until the boy was almost out of sight.

"Just like that, you can make anyone do what you want?" Alexandra said.

"Not just like that. A Confundus Charm is powerful, but it can't force someone to do something they really don't want to do. Your friend almost forced me to take stronger measures."

Alexandra groaned, and the woman knelt next to her.

"You're a foolish, foolish girl." Diana Grimm grabbed Alexandra's left wrist and held it up, looking at the blood still oozing from her missing fingertips. Pain and shock was setting in, along with the horror of

being maimed. Alexandra felt tears spilling from her eyes, however hard she tried to control them.

"You've splinched yourself, and quite badly." Ms. Grimm looked down at Alexandra's legs, and with her other hand, felt gently along her thigh. Alexandra didn't protest, but hissed when the Inquisitor's hand touched her knee.

"You left your fingertips behind, and you arrived with your knees backward. It would serve you right for me to leave you like this." Grimm took her wand out of the pocket of her coat. "Hold still, and close your eyes. This will be a little tricky; it's been a while since I've had to do a Reversal Charm."

Alexandra closed her eyes and held still; that was easy. Ms. Grimm muttered a few incantations and touched Alexandra's fingers with her wand. Alexandra's hands turned numb. Following that was a sharp pain in her legs that made her spasm and almost scream. Her knees felt like they'd been twisted like socket wrenches.

"Well," said Ms. Grimm, "that's taken care of. Splinching is actually easier to fix than broken bones. Those are going to be a problem."

Alexandra opened her eyes and looked at her left hand. Her fingertips had been restored. Cautiously, she flexed her fingers. It didn't hurt. Trying to bend her knees sent another jolt of pain through her legs, and her right arm felt like hot needles had been stabbed through it.

"What were you doing, spying on me?" she asked.

"I came to see just what you were up to, with all that spellcasting. You thought you were being clever, didn't you?" Ms. Grimm smiled at Alexandra's angry expression, and looked up at the dark clouds overhead. The rain had begun to taper off and there wasn't so much lightning anymore, but the air still shook with occasional distant rumbles. "You found out that scrying is difficult in a thunderstorm – perhaps Valeria White told you that? But she didn't tell you it would help you avoid the Trace, did she?"

Alexandra said nothing.

"The Trace is different," Ms. Grimm said. "It's fixed on you, and no storm will obscure it. The Trace Office was aware of every spell you've cast for the past few days, and reported each one to me."

Alexandra winced. Pain and humiliation. She wasn't clever enough after all. "So what are you going to do now?"

Ms. Grimm pointed her wand again. "Ferula." The spell conjured a wooden rod that fell to the ground perfectly parallel to Alexandra's leg, followed by bandages spinning out of thin air. The bandages snaked around Alexandra's leg and the wooden rod and drew tight so suddenly that Alexandra jerked, though the pain was much less than she expected. The bandages cinched themselves and just like that, her leg was splinted. It still hurt terribly.

"My car is parked on the shoulder, about a mile away. I'm going to Apparate there and take you with me. It's going to hurt, because a recent splinching makes you more sensitive to Apparition, and on top of that, you're quite a mess as a result of your fall." Ms. Grimm took her hand, the one attached to the arm that wasn't broken, and put her other hand on Alexandra's shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Alexandra said.

She wasn't. The Apparition made her bruised and broken bones feel like they were being squeezed by iron fingers. She didn't scream, but it was all she could do not to whimper as she found herself lying in the soft mud off the Interstate exit, at the turn-off to a nondescript back road that went past Larkin Mills and on to the next town over.

Ms. Grimm stood and opened the passenger's side door. "I'm going to levitate you into my car." She tilted the passenger's seat back as far as it would go, and with a wave of her wand, Alexandra floated off the ground.

"Tergeo," Ms. Grimm said, followed by "Exaresco." All the mud and dirt flew off of Alexandra, then a billow of steam erupted from her, leaving her dry and clean.

"I just had the upholstery cleaned," Ms. Grimm said, as she floated Alexandra into the car and let gravity settle her into the seat. She reached across her to fasten the seat belt, then walked around to the driver's side and got in.

"Where are we going?" Pain and confusion had sapped Alexandra's will to protest.

Ms. Grimm started the engine. "You need a Healer."

"You're taking me to a wizarding hospital?"

The car's wheels spun for a second in the mud, and then the car jerked forward and gained traction on the firmer surface of the asphalt.

"Not exactly," said Ms. Grimm. "I'm taking you to see your sister."

She drove the car screeching across the exit in a completely illegal crossing and turned left onto the on-ramp on the far side. The car's bouncing and acceleration made Alexandra grit her teeth in pain as they roared onto the Interstate, heading away from Larkin Mills.

Wandless

"What do you mean you're taking me to see my sister?" Alexandra's eyes were squeezed shut. Her arm burned, her leg throbbed, her head ached, her ribs hurt, and the little bumps and jostles and vibrations of the car made everything worse with every mile. None of her sisters were Healers, and none of them lived in Central Territory.

Ms. Grimm said, "Her name is Livia."

Alexandra's eyes popped open.

Maximilian had told her about four other sisters besides Julia. Alexandra had met three of them: Valeria and her older sisters Lucilla and Drucilla. The Whites were the daughters of Abraham Thorn's second wife. None of them had ever met their oldest sister. Maximilian hadn't even known her name.

"Livia," Alexandra repeated.

The car slowed. In her reclined position, Alexandra couldn't see above the dash panel, but a huge green creature loomed over the car on the driver's side, before Ms. Grimm tossed it a gold coin and it retreated, with the sound of a heavy chain dragging across the road in front of them. They had left the Interstate and entered the Automagicka, the magical highway that carried wizard automobiles between cities much faster than any Muggle car could travel.

"Where is she?" Alexandra asked.

"Milwaukee," Ms. Grimm said.

Alexandra grimaced. That was a long drive, even on the Automagicka. "Why are you taking me all the way to Milwaukee? There's a wizarding hospital in Chicago, isn't there?"

"You don't want to meet your sister?"

Alexandra narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Why take me to see her now? You've known about my oldest sister living in Milwaukee all along, haven't you?"

Of course she had. Diana Grimm and her sister were always withholding information from her. Alexandra winced again, and her breath quickened. She was hardly unfamiliar with pain, but she'd never broken two limbs before.

Ms. Grimm glanced at her. A flicker of concern crossed her face, before vanishing. "I don't have any Numbing Potions. I can put you to sleep if you'll allow it."

"If I'll allow it? How, with a Stunner?" Alexandra tried not to flinch at the thought; Stunning Charms hurt.

"A Sleep Charm, Alexandra. It's rather like a Confundus Charm. It doesn't work well unless you're willing."

"No, thanks." Alexandra wanted relief from the pain, but she didn't trust Ms. Grimm. Not that she could do much to resist the Special Inquisitor in her injured condition.

Ms. Grimm shrugged, as if she had expected that response.

Alexandra asked, "Does Livia know about me?"

"Oh, yes."

"But she's never tried to contact me." Alexandra shifted in her seat, trying not to groan. "Is there a wizarding community in Milwaukee?"

"Not really. Livia is Wandless."

"Wandless? You took away her wand?"

"No. The Wandless have left the wizarding world voluntarily and chosen to live among Muggles without magic."

"Why —" Alexandra winced as Ms. Grimm swerved around a slower-moving tractor on the Automagicka. "Why would anyone do that?"

"It is hard to imagine, isn't it? Having seen the wonders of the wizarding world, knowing what you can do with magic, why would you ever walk away from it?"

Alexandra bit her lip. "Because of our father?"

"You'll have to ask her."

They drove on for a while. Then Alexandra said, "You said she's a Healer. Doesn't that mean she still uses magic?"

Ms. Grimm smiled. "She's not supposed to."

Alexandra stared at her. "You're going to use me to catch her using magic?" She fumbled for her wand with her left hand. "Stop the car!" she shouted. "Turn around and take me back to Larkin Mills! I don't care if I have to wear a cast, I'm not helping you entrap my sister!"

Ms. Grimm's hand shot across her and clamped around her wrist – her right wrist. Alexandra screamed as the broken bones ground together, and her wand fell from the fingers of her other hand.

"You foolish, headstrong brat!" Ms. Grimm said. "Always acting without thinking, always leaping to conclusions, always thinking you know better than everyone else." She released Alexandra's wrist. "Don't ever threaten to point a wand at me, especially while I'm driving."

Alexandra would have shrunk away from her if she could. The pain in her arm, which had dulled to a throbbing ache, was fiery agony again. Tears poured down her face. She stared white-hot daggers of hatred at Ms. Grimm, then said, through clenched teeth, "I saved your life."

Ms. Grimm's face became expressionless.

"If you use me to get at my sister, I'll regret I did," Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm drove for a while before she spoke again. "I have no wish to 'get at' your sister, Alexandra. It's not my intention to arrest her."

"Then why are you taking me to her? If you just want me healed, why not take me to Chicago?"

"That would raise awkward questions. Also, I imagine your parents would have a few questions of their own when they receive the bill."

Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut again. There was something the Special Inquisitor wasn't telling her, but she was in too much pain to argue. Going for her wand really had been pretty stupid. She hoped Livia could heal her, or at least do something for the pain. Right now, she wanted that more than she wanted to meet her mysterious older sister.

Milwaukee wasn't directly connected to the Automagicka. Alexandra was beginning to worry about how long it would take them to get home as they entered the city on Interstate 94. She took out her cell phone, reaching carefully with her left hand, and saw that she had a message.

"My stepfather called. I guess my phone didn't ring while we were on the Automagicka."

"You'd better call him back," Ms. Grimm said.

She did. Archie answered immediately. "Where are you?" he demanded.

"Brian's house," she said.

"I saw Brian return to his house. Without you. Why didn't you answer your phone?"

Alexandra let out a frustrated breath, trying not to gasp with pain.

"You were at that pond, weren't you?" he said. "I forbade you to go to Old Larkin Pond, so you made up a story about going to Brian's house. Where are you now?"

Alexandra looked at Ms. Grimm, but the Special Inquisitor was no help.

"Get your behind home right now, Alex," Archie said. "You are in a heap of trouble."

"I can't," she said.

"What do you mean you can't? Where are you? Are you in trouble?" Beneath his sharp tone, there was something else: concern.

"No. I'm fine. I just – ask Mom."

"What? Does Claudia know what you're up to?"

"No, but tell her it has to do with... stuff."

"Stuff? What the hell does that mean?" Archie was becoming more confused and irate. "Alexandra, if you don't start making sense right damn now, you'll be grounded so long you won't even remember what outside looks like!"

"I can't, Archie. Mom will understand. I – I've gotta go." She hung up the phone, then turned it off. She let her head fall back against the seat. "I am so screwed."

"That tends to happen when you lie to your parents."

Alexandra didn't say anything to that.

"So, I take it Claudia knows about 'stuff'?"

Alexandra swallowed. "Are you going to Obliviate her?"

"I believe Claudia has always known more than you give her credit for, Alexandra."

"Then why did you Obliviate her after you interrogated her, after I was born?"

"I told you before," Ms. Grimm said slowly, "that I didn't do that."

Alexandra frowned, and bit back the questions she wanted to ask.

They left the highway. They were in an urban area, full of office buildings, shops, and salons. Ms. Grimm pulled into the parking lot of a medical center ringed by various doctors' offices, then drove around behind the buildings, parking her car next to a large dumpster that had a sign on it saying: 'Caution: Medical Waste.'

"This isn't an emergency room, so bringing an injured teenager in through the front door would prompt questions and possible involvement with Muggle authorities," Ms. Grimm said.

"I don't understand. You said my sister is a Healer. These are doctors' offices."

"Yes." Ms. Grimm got out of the car and walked around to open Alexandra's door. She looked around, then held her wand out and levitated Alexandra out of the car. She magically opened one of the rear office doors and floated Alexandra through it. They proceeded down a carpeted hallway lined with framed pictures of the Great Lakes and generic flower portraits between rows of doors on either side. It looked and smelled like a doctor's office. Sure enough, when Ms. Grimm opened a door to their right, it was an empty room with a long, green examination table. Ms. Grimm gently lowered Alexandra onto the table.

"Wait here," the Inquisitor said.

Alexandra clenched her teeth in frustration. She raised herself up with her unbroken arm and looked around. There were pictures on the walls showing cross sections of the ears, nose, and throat, and diagrams of the human skeletal system and internal organs. Q-tips, wooden sticks, tissues, and latex gloves sat on the counter next to a gleaming chrome sink. It looked like every doctor's office she'd seen.

Someone was arguing with Ms. Grimm in the hall in a low, angry voice: "What do you mean, you couldn't bring her anywhere else? This is outrageous! You have no right!"

A woman in her early thirties, wearing a white coat over a light green blouse, entered the room. Her eyes fell on Alexandra, and her anger vanished, replaced by shock. She turned on Ms. Grimm. "You brought her here? Her? Here?"

"She's injured," Ms. Grimm said.

The woman turned back around to stare at Alexandra. She had straight black hair pulled back in a bun. Her face was thin and angular; behind square, black-framed glasses, her eyes were the same shade of green as Alexandra's, and the shape of her nose was familiar. The nameplate pinned to her breast pocket read: 'Dr. L.J. Pruett.'

"Hi." Alexandra wasn't sure what to say to her sister. "This wasn't my idea."

Dr. Pruett pursed her lips and walked to the table. "What happened to you?"

"I fell out of a tree."

"Aren't you a witch?"

Alexandra winced as the doctor examined her arm. "It turns out that doesn't make you immune to gravity. Also, I'd just splinched myself."

"This is a compound fracture," Dr. Pruett said to Ms. Grimm. "Why did you bring her all the way to Milwaukee instead of taking her to the hospital in Larkin Mills?"

"I think she wanted us to meet," Alexandra said.

"I don't suppose you gave her anything for the pain?"

"I offered a Sleep Charm," Ms. Grimm said. "She refused."

Dr. Pruett put a hand on Alexandra's leg, and her face softened when Alexandra hissed through her teeth. "You're a minor. I can't treat you without your parents' permission."

"You're kidding," Alexandra gasped.

"Unless it's life threatening. I have to obey the law."

"Yes, Doctor Pruett, and you are so careful about obeying the law, aren't you?" Ms. Grimm unfolded her arms and walked into the examination room, pulling the door shut behind her. "You would never dream of using magic, for example, to treat a Muggle."

Dr. Pruett glared at her.

"A few potions hidden away, for emergencies," Ms. Grimm said softly. "A charm every now and then, for someone in pain that no Muggle medicine can relieve. And perhaps – every once in a while – there's a patient you just can't stand to let die when you know there's something you can do about it."

"I'm not a Healer anymore. I'm a doctor. What do you want, Ms. Grimm?"

"I want you to mend your sister's broken bones."

"Why did you bring her here? Why not the Queen of Chicago Sanatorium?" Then the other woman's mouth fell open. "Did you do this to her?"

Ms. Grimm shook her head. "Where do you get these ideas? The two of you are so alike."

Dr. Pruett turned to look at Alexandra again.

"She didn't," Alexandra said, feeling like she might pass out. "I really did fall out of a tree. Look, if you won't help me, can I at least have some aspirin?"

Dr. Pruett sighed. "Wait here. I... have a wand in my office."

"Of course you do," Ms. Grimm said.

The doctor pushed past her. Alexandra lay on the table with her eyes closed so she wouldn't have to look at Ms. Grimm. A minute later, Dr. Pruett returned. Alexandra opened her eyes. The Healer/doctor held a wand and a familiar-looking old-fashioned bottle with 'Fudd's Grow-All' on the label.

"Get out," Dr. Pruett said to Ms. Grimm. "I want to be alone with my patient."

Ms. Grimm raised an eyebrow, then walked out the door, closing it behind her.

Dr. Pruett murmured something and touched her wand to Alexandra's arm. The pain subsided quickly. She did the same to her leg, and it likewise stopped hurting so terribly.

"Thank you," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry Ms. Grimm is harassing you."

"Doesn't she harass you?" The Healer twisted the top off the potion bottle.

"Yes." Alexandra studied her older sister, the sister whom none of her other siblings had ever met. "You said Larkin Mills – you know where I live. You've known about me all this time, haven't you?"

"I've known about you since the day you were born."

"But you never wanted to meet me?"

Dr. Pruett held out the bottle of Fudd's Grow-All. "This will mend your bones overnight, but you need to keep your limbs still. And it will hurt. Can you go home and rest until tomorrow, and handle the discomfort?"

"When I get home, I probably won't be able to do anything but rest, since I'll be grounded for the rest of my life." Alexandra took the bottle and sniffed the contents. It smelled innocuous enough, but this wasn't the first time she'd had to have bones magically healed.

"It tastes terrible," Dr. Pruett said. "You have to swallow all of it."

"I know." Alexandra tilted it back and gulped it down. She almost retched. The earwax-and-beetles taste was worse than she remembered, and the pungent aroma filled her mouth and nose, making her gag. She choked and her sister held her shoulders down to keep her from rolling over.

"Swallow it," the doctor said. Alexandra gulped the mouthful of Grow-All with an effort, and then stuck her pasty, coated tongue out, trying to taste clean air.

"You're a little old to be climbing trees, and a little young to be Apparating," Livia said. "I'd avoid both in the future."

"What's it like, being Wandless?" Alexandra asked, in a choked voice.

"I have a wand."

Alexandra looked at the wand in Livia's hand. There were tiny letters carved into the wood, and it was devoid of any leather wrappings or metal bands or gems or any ornamentation at all; it was just a plain

wooden stick. It made her think of the cheap wands sold at Grundy's Department Store.

"Ms. Grimm says you gave up magic."

"Mostly." Livia put the wand in her coat pocket, then screwed the cap back on the bottle of Fudd's Grow-All and put that in her pocket, too. "You'll start feeling pain shortly as your bones heal. Here." She held out a bottle of white pills. Alexandra held her left hand out, and her sister dropped two into her palm. Alexandra put them in her mouth while Livia went to the sink and filled a paper cup with water, which she handed to Alexandra.

Alexandra washed down the pills. "You really didn't want to meet me, did you?"

"I'm sorry, Alexandra. It's not personal."

"Is it because of our father?"

Livia didn't say anything.

"Did he abandon you, too?"

"I'll ask Ms. Grimm to take you home now," Livia said.

Alexandra stared at her angrily. When she walked to the door, Alexandra said, "Did you know we had a brother?"

Livia paused, with her back still to Alexandra. "I heard about Maximilian. I never met him. But I am sorry."

Alexandra's arm and leg were beginning to tingle unpleasantly. She opened and closed the fingers of her right hand slowly. "He wanted to meet his oldest sister someday. So did I. Too bad for both of us, I guess."

Livia stood there silently. After a minute, someone called, "Dr. Pruett?" from down the corridor outside the office.

"I have other patients. Move your limbs as little as possible. Stay out of trees, and don't try to Apparate before you're ready." Dr. Pruett

turned her head, and said in a quiet voice, "I'm not your oldest sister."

"What?" The question came out as a gasp, as Alexandra felt the first stab of pain in her bones.

"I'm not our father's oldest. I'm the second-born. Your name is Alexandra Octavia, yes? The eighth child."

Alexandra opened her mouth, but Livia Pruett had already gone out the door, sliding past Ms. Grimm, who walked in.

"Why did you do this?" Alexandra asked.

Ms. Grimm eyed her appraisingly. "I thought you deserved to meet your sister."

"Like hell." Alexandra clenched her teeth. "Are you going to take me home now, or is there another sister you want to take me to see and mess up her life?"

Diana Grimm stood there for a long, thoughtful moment, but said only, "I believe it's time for you to go home."

They didn't speak much on the drive back to Larkin Mills. Alexandra was in less pain than she'd been in on the drive to Milwaukee, thanks to Livia's charms, but the Grow-All still hurt as it forced her bones to heal at magical speed. She bit her lip and stared out the window and thought about what Livia had said. There were seven of them now. Seven sisters. Why hadn't her father told her about all of her siblings?

"I will speak to your parents, if you think it will help," Ms. Grimm said, as they entered Larkin Mills.

Alexandra looked at her for the first time in many miles. "You mean Confound them? Or Oblivate them? No thanks. I'd rather just take my grounding."

"As you wish."

"When is anything ever as I wish?" Alexandra snapped. "This is all a game to you, and you treat me and my sisters like pawns, and Muggles like less than that!"

"I'm not the one moving you about the chess board. It's your father who put the pieces in motion, before you were born."

"I never asked to play the game."

"Most people don't. The rest of the world is indifferent to your suffering. I, at least, am willing to listen to you."

"Only if you think I might tell you something useful."

"I didn't make you a Secret Keeper, your father did."

"I'm not a Secret Keeper anymore!"

Ms. Grimm smiled thinly. "Aren't you?"

"I told you everything I know about the Thorn Circle. I told you everything about Maximilian and Darla and the Lands Below. There are no more secrets to protect."

Ms. Grimm didn't reply to that, but her cold smile made Alexandra wary and suspicious.

She hated Diana Grimm and her sister, Dean Grimm, and her father, and right now she pretty much hated the whole wizarding world. Ms. Grimm seemed to sense Alexandra's mood, and didn't say anything more until they pulled up in front of the Greens' house on Sweetmaple Avenue.

It was late afternoon, but not yet time for her mother to have gotten off work at the hospital, so when she saw her mother's car in the driveway next to Archie's truck Alexandra knew there was no hope of sneaking inside. Then she saw Brian sitting on the front step. Her expression was as dumbfounded as his when he sat up and looked at Diana Grimm's car.

"That boy," Ms. Grimm said. "How much does he know?"

Alexandra tore her gaze away from Brian. "Nothing," she said quickly. "I hardly even talk to him anymore."

"How much does he know, Alexandra?"

"Please, leave him alone."

"How much does he know?" Ms. Grimm repeated a third time, in an implacable, commanding voice.

Alexandra closed her eyes. "He's known I could do magic since we were little. But once I started going to Charmbridge, we stopped talking." She opened her eyes again. "You're the one who animated that store mannequin right in front of him."

"Yes, so I did." Ms. Grimm regarded Brian thoughtfully. "Muggle friends and family have always seen glimpses of our world. But the restrictions are much tighter than they used to be."

"Let me guess – the WODAMND Act says it's a crime if I tell him anything, even though you can do whatever you want."

Ms. Grimm said, "I'll leave your friend be – for now – on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Promise me no more attempts to Apparate. At all. Not until you've taken Apparition classes and gotten a license."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. Brian stood there watching the car, shuffling his feet. Pretty soon her parents would see them.

"I promise," she said.

"You still have my card?" Ms. Grimm asked.

"You ask me that every time. Yes, I still have it."

"One of these days, you will want to call me. Go on, then. Remember what Dr. Pruett said – get plenty of rest. Have a good year at Charmbridge."

Suspiciously, Alexandra got out of the car and closed the door. Ms. Grimm waved and drove off, leaving Alexandra standing in the street a few feet from the curb, facing Brian across her lawn.

She hobbled to the curb, then strode across the sidewalk and slowly up the path, trying not to limp. Each step was like pressing a hot iron on her leg.

"Who was that?" Brian asked.

"Someone from my school," she said. "What are you doing here?"

He stared at her incredulously. "Your arm and leg were broken."

Alexandra cursed inwardly. The Confundus Charm might have made him compliant, but it hadn't taken away his memories. "No. It just hurt a lot right after I fell. It looked worse than it was."

"Your arm was broken!" he insisted. "I could see it!" He looked her up and down. "And you were bleeding." He was becoming agitated. "I... I left you there. I don't know why I did that! That woman, did she take you to a hospital?"

"Forget it, Brian. I'm all right now." It hurt just to stand there. Alexandra wanted to go inside and get the yelling over with so she could lie down.

"I saw you! You fell out of a tree and your arm and leg were broken and your hands were bleeding –"

She held up her hands. "See? I'm fine."

He shook his head stubbornly. "I know what I saw."

Too much, she thought. All her weight was on her good leg, and she was gritting her teeth. Her sister's pain-numbing charm must be wearing off.

"How can you walk around after that?" he asked.

Out of patience, she gave him a flat stare and said, "Magic."

He stared back at her. Then the door behind him opened, and Alexandra's mother was standing there. "Alex! Brian – what...? Never mind. I'm sorry, you have to go home now." When she spoke to Alexandra, her tone became hard and angry. "Inside, now."

Brian didn't say anything. He just watched Alexandra go inside, with a confused expression on his face.

Alexandra was used to being in trouble. Usually her stepfather yelled at her, her mother gave her an exasperated lecture, and she was grounded. But this time was different. Archie called her a runaway and said he'd almost had the Larkin Mills Police Department looking for her. Her mother had not been reassured by her cryptic message.

While her parents were remonstrating with her, Alexandra sat stiffly on the sofa trying to hide her physical discomfort.

"All Brian could tell us was that he saw you with a woman you'd been with before in the mall," her mother said.

Alexandra held herself very still. Her arm and leg bones felt like hot metal warming to a fiery glow inside her flesh, and she didn't dare show it because her mother would insist on knowing how she'd been hurt and what had happened to her. "It was Ms. Grimm."

"What the hell was Ms. Grimm doing with you out at Old Larkin Pond?" Archie said. "There's something awfully damned strange about that school of yours."

Alexandra snorted, which allowed her to wince without showing pain. "You think?"

"That's enough," her mother said. "Alexandra, go to your room. Archie and I need to talk."

"Give me your phone first." Archie held out his hand. "No more phone privileges for you."

"Don't you want me to be able to call if I get kidnapped again?" Pain was not improving her judgment.

Archie's face turned red and he was about to yell something else, but her mother, who had been watching her, asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Just taking her cell phone out of her pocket was a trial. Alexandra held it out with her left hand while keeping her right arm pressed to her side. Archie snatched the phone.

"Go upstairs," her mother said. "I'll be up there in a few minutes."

Alexandra wondered what else her mother wanted to say to her, but she rose to her feet and forced herself to walk as normally as she could up the stairs. When she reached her room, she collapsed to her bed and pressed her face into her pillow to stifle a gasp.

Charlie jumped off her desk and landed next to her. "Troublesome!"

She groaned. Charlie always knew when she was in trouble.

"Troublesome vexes, Troubles woes," said the raven.

She groaned again. "I'm not in the mood, Charlie."

The bird croaked a compunctious "Sorry."

She closed her eyes. A few minutes later there was a knock on her door. From outside her room, her mother said, "We were really concerned."

Without opening her eyes, Alexandra said, "I used to run all over Larkin Mills by myself or with Brian. Why are you suddenly worried about me now?"

There was a long pause. Then she heard her mother open the door and enter her room.

"I've always been worried about you," her mother said. "What did Ms. Grimm want with you?"

"Just to talk."

She felt a hand on her leg. She flinched.

"What happened to you?" her mother asked.

Slowly, Alexandra rolled onto her good side. "You really want to know?"

"Yes." Her mother's face was tense, but she didn't look away.

"I fell out of a tree at Old Larkin Pond and broke an arm and a leg. Ms. Grimm happened to be there, because she's got this crazy obsessive interest in me, and she took me to a wizard Healer, who gave me a magic potion to heal me."

Her mother turned pale. "Did it heal you?"

"It doesn't work instantly. It's healing me now. But it really hurts – a lot. So if you and Archie have any more yelling to do, can I just lie here while you do it?"

Her mother sat next to her without saying anything. At last, she asked, "What was Ms. Grimm doing in Larkin Mills?"

"You'd have to ask her." Alexandra thought about explaining that there were two Ms. Grimms, but that would prolong an already painful conversation.

Her mother seemed to be struggling with her words. "Remember what I said last year. You don't have to go to Charmbridge if you don't want to."

For a moment, Alexandra found herself seriously considering that. She had seen someone die every year she'd gone to Charmbridge. She'd lost her brother and nearly died herself. Could she walk away from the wizarding world like Livia had?

She would miss her friends terribly, and she would miss magic, but she also missed the girl she had been, the girl who ran carefree through Larkin Mills, aggravating adults, confounding bullies, daring Brian to follow her, doing magic for fun.

She shook her head very slowly. She was too much a part of the wizarding world now. And if there was a chance for her to live more than seven years, she'd only find it there.

"It's my world now, Mom," she said. And added, with unusual sincerity, "I'm sorry."

Charlie said, "Sorry," which made Claudia start.

She touched Alexandra's shoulder. "I'll bring you something to eat. Lie still and heal." She rose to her feet.

"Am I still grounded?"

"You'd better believe it. Don't ever hang up on one of us again, or disappear like that. And don't tell us stories again, Alex. We aren't as stupid as you think we are."

"So does Archie know I'm a witch?"

Claudia paused. "Not exactly. I think he suspects you're like those people with special powers in the movies."

"People in the movies?" Alexandra groaned. "Great, Archie thinks I'm a mutant."

By the next day, she could walk with only a little pain, and after a few days her bones no longer ached. Her parents didn't relent on her punishment, however. She wasn't allowed out of the house again. Archie refused to return her phone, and on days when her parents both had to work, they called her at home, with dire warnings about the consequences should she not be there.

Given her promise to Diana Grimm, and her discovery that she couldn't hide magic use from the Trace Office, Alexandra had little reason to violate her restrictions. She was forced to call Payton long-distance using the house phone. She was not amused that he thought it was funny that she'd lost her cell phone privileges.

By the end of the summer, she was bored enough to think about actually running away. She counted down the days to the arrival of the Charmbridge bus.

Hags

For a while, Alexandra worried that her parents might refuse to let her go to the Goblin Market. The morning the Charmbridge bus came to take her on the annual shopping trip a week before school started, Archie waited with her, as if he didn't trust her.

"I'm not sure we should be letting you go to Chicago," he said, sipping his coffee. "There has to be some way to mail order your school supplies."

Alexandra was standing in the kitchen, watching out the window. "Whatever," she muttered. She could endure one more week. She saw the short yellow bus come around the corner and grabbed her backpack.

"Don't 'whatever' me." Archie clenched his coffee cup and looked as if he were going to say more. Alexandra tensed and kept her mouth shut – he wouldn't force her to stay home now, would he?

"You're fourteen," he said, "not an adult. Whatever they teach you at that school, you'd better remember you're still the kid around here when you come home."

"Yes, Archie." She struggled very hard to say this without sounding sarcastic. Outside, the bus pulled to a stop in front of their house. "Can I go?"

"You're still grounded when you get back."

Alexandra hurried out the door before she retorted that he'd told her that fifty times already.

From the outside, the simple yellow Charmbridge school bus looked like it could carry perhaps twenty people crowded together. As soon as Alexandra stepped aboard, however, the interior space of the bus stretched back and across with impossible dimensions, large enough to hold dozens of students in comfortable booths. Far in the rear were stairs going up to a second level where even more students sat.

"Hello, Miss Quick," said the elderly bus driver, Tabitha Speaks. "You've had an uneventful summer, I hope?"

Alexandra wondered what she meant by that, but just said, "Yeah, nothing special." With a polite wave to the frizzy-haired witch, she walked to the back of the bus where her fellow ninth graders were seated.

Faces turned her way as she walked down the aisle. Younger students looked at her with fear or awe. Even the brand new sixth graders were staring at her, except for one girl who must have heard such terrible things about the notorious daughter of Abraham Thorn that she turned in her seat and hid her face. Alexandra resisted the temptation to yell 'Boo!'

Seated amidst the seventh graders, a pudgy tow-headed boy with a round face smiled at her. "Hi, Alexandra."

She gave him a small smile back. "Hello, William."

"Are you in the JROC again this year?" he asked.

"Yes." She paused. "Are you?"

William Killmond had not had an easy time in the Junior Regimental Officer Corps the previous year. A Muggle-born new to the wizarding world, he'd been picked on and bullied by his fellow JROC mages, and Alexandra hadn't thought he'd want to wear the uniform again.

He nodded enthusiastically. "I'll, uh, see you at drills, then."

William's friends eyed him and Alexandra uneasily.

"Yeah," she said. "See you there."

Toward the rear of the bus were the ninth and tenth graders, most of whom were less intimidated by her but still treated her as someone dangerous to know. Among the sophomores, only Torvald Krogstad greeted her in a friendly manner, and she suspected he was waiting for a chance to hex her.

No Larry Albo, she thought. Her nemesis since her first day in the wizarding world was an eleventh grader now, which meant he and his friends got to sit on the privileged upper level of the bus. Which was fine with her – the less she saw of his smirking face, the better.

Edging past Torvald and his friend Stuart Cortlandt, Alexandra was greeted by smiles from her friends at the next table. Anna Chu was sitting across from Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence Pritchard. Alexandra slid into the seat beside Anna and gave her best friend a hug. Then she took a moment to note Anna's fancy red, orange, and yellow robes, and her hair. Anna usually wore her black hair long and straight, but today it was curled above her ears in Chinese ox horns held by fancy pins. An additional shock: she was wearing makeup! Her face was as smooth and fair as one of Alexandra's reflections in Julia's magic mirror.

"I know," Anna said. "It's to make my father happy. He wants me to dress nicely and look like a Congressman's daughter when I'm in public."

"For a school shopping trip?"

"I think she looks purty," said Innocence.

"She does," Alexandra agreed.

Anna raised a sleeve to her face to hide her blush, then said, narrowing her eyes at Innocence, "She said I looked like a little Chinese doll." She sounded more amused than offended, but it was Innocence's turn to blush. Anna looked at Alexandra again and said, "You're wearing earrings."

"It's to make my sister happy," Alexandra said. "She wants me to dress nicely and look like a girl when I'm in public. She settled for piercing my ears." She gave the Pritchards a wry smile. "So no Rashes 'chaperoning' you this year?"

Constance and Forbearance looked at one another, while Innocence's cheeks inflated in the manner of someone dying to say something and who wanted everyone present to know that she was very deliberately keeping her mouth shut, but only with great effort.

"They'uns 're upstairs with the other 'leventh graders." Forbearance gestured at the space above them. "We'uns said we prefer to sit with our friends."

"But they is gonna escort us at the Goblin Market," Constance said.

"You mean chaperone," Alexandra said.

"Now, Alexandra, they hain't spoke a word 'gainst you since last year."

"They're just supposed to keep me away from you," Alexandra said.

"Hain't all," Innocence muttered, then closed her mouth after receiving an elbow from Constance.

"We're freshmen now," Alexandra said. "We finally get to walk around the Goblin Market without senior chaperones, and you still have to put up with Benjamin and Mordecai 'escorting' you."

Forbearance looked pained. "It ain't that simple, Alexandra."

"Anyhow, we'd prefer to nevermind the Rashes just now," Constance said. "How have you been, Alex, dear?"

"I'm okay." Maybe later she would relate her encounter with Ms. Grimm, meeting Livia, and her mysterious sixth sister, but that wasn't something to talk about here. "How have you been, Innocence?" she asked the youngest Pritchard.

"Right as rain," Innocence said, her deep blue eyes wide and guileless.

Her sisters' faces said otherwise, but they didn't contradict her.

They all continued talking, Innocence interjecting comments that the older girls received with good-natured tolerance, until the bus reached Detroit on its wide circuit along the Automagicka.

David Washington boarded the bus, wearing the jersey of his father's football team. He walked directly down the aisle to where Alexandra, Anna, and the Pritchards sat, and addressed the Ozarkers. "So, no Rashes?"

"Why hello, David, how nice to see you, too," said Constance, folding her hands on the table in front of her.

"And how was your summer?" asked Forbearance.

"We'uns had a fine summer, thankee much for askin'," Constance said.

David stood there trying to banish the chagrin and confusion from his face. Innocence giggled.

He regrouped. "Hello."

"Sit down, dork," Alexandra said.

He took a seat next to her. "I just meant —"

"We'uns know what you meant," Constance said.

Forbearance, more sympathetically, asked, "Is it true Angelique ain't comin' back to Charmbridge?"

David nodded glumly. "Yeah. She's going to Baleswood now."

"So that's why you're sittin' with us," said Innocence.

"Nah," David said, "I'm sitting with you'uns 'cause I missed you so much, Innocence." He leaned forward with his lips pursed comically as if he meant to kiss her from across the table. Innocence shrank back into her seat in shock, mouth open and cheeks flaming red. Even Constance and Forbearance laughed at this, though Alexandra noticed their cheeks were red also.

After that, it was impossible to discuss anything seriously, so for the rest of the ride to Chicago, they talked about what they had done over the summer, the classes they were taking this year, and how wonderful it would be to explore the Goblin Market as unchaperoned freshmen, able to visit all the shops and side streets that had been forbidden to them until now.

When Mrs. Speaks parked the bus in front of Grobnowski's Old World Deli in Chicago, everyone filed out and marched in an orderly procession through the establishment. The old witch and wizard who were always behind the counter never said a word to the students who tromped through their store every year. The deli's interior was lined with smoky wooden timbers and had a smell of ancient wine, cured meat, and odoriferous cheeses. Alexandra thought about

coming back to sample some of those multi-colored 'wizard cheeses' now that she could, but soon they were through the door in the back and stepping onto the streets of the Goblin Market, and there were many other things to draw her attention.

Eager to be set loose to roam freely (all the more eager because of the past few weeks she'd spent confined to her house), she barely listened to Mrs. Speaks' admonitions about behaving like Charmbridge students and being back in the main square by four p.m. The sixth, seventh, and eighth graders all had to line up with a senior chaperone who would escort them from one shop to another to buy the books and supplies they needed for the coming year. Innocence grumbled but joined the other seventh graders.

Alexandra surveyed the cobblestone streets and the shops nearest them. They were filled with everything from wizard pastries to robes and hats to brooms and Clockworks and magical boxes and charmed pens and dancing tableware and scrying glasses and many more wonders than she could ever afford to buy, but now she could look at it all without a nagging senior prompting her to move on, hurry up, stop dawdling.

Her smile faded as her eyes fell on the line of sixth graders, and the girl who had turned her face away when Alexandra had boarded the bus.

Pretty, with eyes as dark as her hair, the sixth grade girl was wearing purple and white robes that rivaled Anna's in elegance. And she was no longer hiding her face: she was staring directly at Alexandra. Alexandra felt a chill that was stronger than the late summer heat.

"Alex?" Anna said. She looked at the younger girl and back at Alexandra.

Then the girl turned away with her classmates as the excited sixth graders marched off to Hoargrim's to get their wands.

"Who was that?" Anna asked.

"Mary Dearborn," Alexandra said. "Darla's younger sister."

David's jaw dropped. "You're kidding."

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?"

"No." He stepped back at her sudden intensity. "I just meant – why...?"

"Why would she come to Charmbridge Academy?"

He nodded. "Well, yeah. I mean, you'd think..."

"That her parents wouldn't want her anywhere near the girl responsible for her sister's death?"

David, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance all fell silent. Alexandra looked around quickly. The other ninth graders had already dispersed across the square.

"Alex," Anna said, "you weren't responsible."

Constance spoke in a whisper. "Darla..." She looked at her sister. Forbearance leaned forward and touched Alexandra's arm.

"We can't never know what Darla conceived, not really," Forbearance said.

Alexandra stared at her bleakly, and turned away, to find Anna and David looking at her also.

You don't know, she thought. And they didn't know. Alexandra doubted that even Mary knew why her sister had died.

She hoped she didn't.

"Are you'uns fixin' to gabbledegook all day when you could do that at school?" Benjamin Rash said, as he and Mordecai Rash marched up to them.

Like Constance and Forbearance, the Rashes were identical twins. As blond and blue-eyed as the Pritchards, their thick, rough pants, long-sleeved shirts, suspenders, and wide-brimmed hats set them apart from other wizards as much as from Muggles. Both of the Ozarker boys pointedly did not look at Alexandra, Anna, or David.

Alexandra didn't say anything to them, but her teeth were clenched, and so were David's. The Rashes had made clear in no uncertain terms that they did not approve of pure-blooded Ozarkers consorting with 'Mudbloods' and 'foreigners.'

"Where do you'uns prefer to go firstly?" Mordecai asked, in a less belligerent tone than his brother.

"I reckon we oughter get books," Forbearance said. "But do let's eat lunch at Goody Pruett's." Alexandra caught her eye and nodded.

"See you later," Alexandra said as the Ozarkers bustled off.

Alexandra saw Larry Albo among the eleventh graders. She watched him a moment. He was with his friends Wade White and Ethan Robinson, but his girlfriend, Adela Iturbide, hadn't joined them. Her eyes drifted over to the tenth graders; Adela was retreating up the street with a group of fellow sophomores, without a backward glance at Larry.

Abruptly, Alexandra realized Larry was watching her with a small, annoyed frown. She frowned back at him, and the Old Colonial boy made a dismissive gesture and turned his back on her. He and his friends headed toward a broom shop, in the opposite direction from both Adela and Alexandra.

Mrs. Speaks called Alexandra's name, along with Torvald Krogstad and several others. The bus driver walked over to them and handed each of them an envelope.

"Charity cases!" yelled one of the retreating upperclassmen.

Mrs. Speaks looked up sharply. "Who said that?" No one turned around. Alexandra looked in Larry's direction again – no, he was already too far down the street.

"The letter in this envelope authorizes you to purchase approved school supplies only," Mrs. Speaks said.

Alexandra had been receiving a scholarship to attend Charmbridge Academy since sixth grade. In previous years, it had been her senior chaperone who signed for her school purchases. She glanced at Torvald. She'd never thought he was a scholarship student as well.

In fact, she'd never thought about whether anyone else was attending on a scholarship.

Torvald grinned at her. "So, little Troublesome is on a scholarship. I always thought your father was paying for you to come to Charmbridge."

She refrained from saying something rude only because Mrs. Speaks was standing right there.

"Don't even think about showing that note for any items not on your list," Mrs. Speaks said. "It's a letter of credit issued by Gringotts and the goblins will come to collect you if you charge something that Charmbridge won't pay for."

"You mean collect what they're owed?"

"I said what I meant, Miss Quick." Mrs. Speaks waved her hands. "Now go on, get your shopping done. Be back by four."

David and Anna were still waiting for her. David shuffled his feet. "So, uh, me and Dylan are gonna go check out Highlander Mage Supplies. They've got brooms and Quods and games and things... dueling equipment, too."

David's Muggle-born roommate, Dylan Weitzner, was tossing a pidge into the fountain at the center of the square, and dodging the streams of water that the animated stone fish squirted at him.

"Okay," Alexandra said. "But I want to go to one of those ocularmancy shops and look at Weatherglobes afterwards."

The Goblin Market was tiny compared to the rest of downtown Chicago, but Alexandra and her classmates had seen little of it on their previous visits. They had been shepherded from Hoargrim's Wands and Alchemical Supplies to Boxley's Books to Grundy's Department Store by their senior chaperones, purchasing alchemical supplies, schoolbooks, robes, and other school essentials. If they were lucky, their chaperones might allow them to do a bit of window-shopping or visit one or two other establishments along the way, but they had not been free to explore all the businesses packed into this magical shopping district that served all

of Central Territory. There were streets Alexandra had never been down, and stores and restaurants she had never seen before.

They spent the first hour visiting shops of interest. Highlander Mage Supplies had everything from Quidditch and Quodpot equipment to wizard card games to wand care kits, and some very nice wand sheaths, finger gloves, dueling rings, and other items that made Alexandra wish she had more spending money. Then they went to the Astronomy Tower, where Alexandra and Anna inspected Weatherglobes, which were too expensive, and scrying balls, which were even more expensive, while David and Dylan went to a shelf displaying glass eyeballs and started ogling each other through them.

"Dude, you'd be kind of hot as a chick," said Dylan, peering at David through an eye with little Mars and Venus signs etched on it.

"Way TMI," David said, squinting at Dylan through an eye with 'FutureVision™' printed on the card in front of its stand. He snickered. "Man, you're gonna go bald!"

"You are so full of crap," Dylan said, as David looked at Alexandra.

"Young man," said the proprietor, "can you not read?" He was a white-haired man with a pointy chin and long, bony fingers. He plucked the eyeball out of David's hand, glared at Dylan, who put his back, and pointed at the sign on the shelf: 'Do not handle unless you intend to buy. All merchandise is protected by Thieves Curses.'

"We weren't stealing anything," David said.

"Do you wish to buy this?" the wizard asked, holding up the glass eyeball.

"Sixteen lions? I don't think so."

"Then I'm going to have to ask all of you to leave. This is not a toy store."

There was something distasteful in the proprietor's expression as he looked at them, with his eyes passing over David's sports jersey, Alexandra's chambray shirt and jeans, and Dylan's Cleveland

Indians t-shirt and baggy pants. He glanced at Anna, the only one of them not wearing Muggle clothing, then gestured at the door.

Alexandra expected David to say something, but he didn't, and they all filed sullenly out of the store.

"Did you see the way he was looking at us?" Alexandra asked.

"Yeah." David nodded. "No love for Muggle-borns." But he wore an odd expression.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"When I looked at Dylan, he got older the longer I looked at him."

"So?"

"When I looked at you, you only got a little older."

Alexandra felt a little shiver, but she shrugged. "Well, he took it away from you before you could look longer."

David opened his mouth, and she cut him off: "C'mon, we'd better get our schoolbooks."

The four of them walked to Boxley's Books, the largest book store in the Goblin Market. There were other Charmbridge students there, but Alexandra ignored them as she roamed the stacks, pulling books off the shelves and flipping through them and trying to decide how many non-textbooks she could buy with her meager spending money. There were only a few books with dueling charms and other offensive spells that weren't hidden upstairs behind the door marked 'Very Special Interests (Adults Only).' Books that taught curses or anything else even remotely resembling Dark Arts would be kept there, inaccessible to her. She browsed through books about Powers and elves and magical oaths, and finally gathered her required textbooks when she realized that Anna and David and Dylan were waiting for her. She showed her letter of credit at the counter to pay for her textbooks, and handed over most of her pocket money for Wards Have Weaknesses – Purely Academic Exploitations.

David and Dylan wanted to go to Grundy's Department Store next, but Alexandra wanted to investigate the side streets they had passed by.

"Some of those streets back there look pretty shady," David said.

"Says the guy from Detroit," Dylan said.

"The nice part of Detroit."

Alexandra said, "Well, I want to see what's there."

"Of course you do," David said.

"No need for you to come along."

"Right, like we're gonna let you go by yourselves."

"Yeah, we need a couple of boys to protect us, just like Constance and Forbearance. Go to Grundy's if you want." Alexandra noticed that Anna also showed a marked lack of enthusiasm. "I just want to look. We're still going to be right here in the Goblin Market – it's not like we're going into downtown Chicago."

Anna nodded reluctantly.

Alexandra set off, with Anna at her side and David and Dylan grumbling as they followed. The first couple of side streets were just filled with more shops, mostly selling robes, hats, potion supplies, coffee and tea, and other mundane items. They were dingier and cheaper than the stores along the Goblin Market's main street, but no more interesting.

The third street they ventured into was directly behind the Wizardrail station, but it was the dimmest and worst-smelling of all. Most of the doors up and down the alley were unmarked; a few had painted signs hanging above them, or lanterns hanging from iron hooks. At the far end, deep in the shadows, a baleful green flame flickered in the only lamp that was lit at this time of day. A few of the establishments had metal sculptures of centaurs or chimeras or other creatures mounted above the doors. The scant light glinted off of broken glass.

"Man, this place looks worse than Detroit," said Dylan.

"Almost as bad as Cleveland," said David.

The street was empty except for a tall, long-haired woman wearing a shawl talking to a shorter, broader woman with a hunched back. The women were halfway down the alley, hidden in the shadows of one of the unlit doorways.

"Can we go?" Anna said. "This place is giving me the creeps."

"Yeah," Alexandra said. Just then, a train rumbled into the Wizardrail station on the other side of the buildings. The tall woman turned and walked across the shadowy street toward a side alley, and as she passed through the thin wedge of sunlight falling across the teens at the mouth of the alley, Alexandra caught a glimpse of her face.

The 'woman' wasn't a woman – it was a young man with long, black hair. His shawl was checkered with red and black geometric designs.

He slowed as he stepped out of the sunlight and back into the shadows. Alexandra saw his glittering dark eyes turned her way, and the round face and prominent nose. Then he was swallowed by the alley.

"No way," she said, and ran after him.

"Alex!" Anna and David shouted after her.

Alexandra's wand was out. The hunchbacked woman made a startled noise. Alexandra saw red eyes and an enormous nose above jagged yellow teeth; she veered away from her and ran along the far wall until she reached the alley. She went around the corner with her wand held in front of her, but all she saw was another gloomy side street, this one lined with doors that didn't seem to belong to businesses, at least none that hung signs out front. It felt as if she'd stepped into another timezone, the way daylight was swallowed by the walls squeezing together and rising high above her. In fact, the buildings on the opposite side of the alley were so high they had to be offices or apartment buildings, possibly marking the edge of Muggle Chicago, the back-facing portion that abutted the Goblin Market.

Her friends caught up to her. Anna had her wand out also, and was looking fearfully at the hag, who was now lurking by the entrance of one of the taverns. "Alex, what are you doing?" she asked in a high-pitched voice.

David sounded almost as nervous. "Girl, we need to get out of here!"

Alexandra said, "I saw John Manuelito."

"Who?" asked Dylan.

Alexandra walked a few steps into the alley. It had a slight curve to it, which she couldn't see from the intersection; the far end was not visible.

"Alex, I'm pretty sure we shouldn't be here," Anna said.

Further down the alley, Alexandra saw a red and black corner of cloth flapping and a figure disappearing into the shadows. She ran after it, ignoring the small creatures that chattered underfoot and something that flapped past her ears. There were ghostly lights and what might have been a pale face or two on the other side of the windows lining the alley. Even though the sun should have been directly overhead, it felt as if she were running into evening. She reached the end of the alley and saw the Goblin Market's main street to her left, but she turned right, the direction she'd seen the figure she thought was John Manuelito going. Now there was a door with an electric light bulb flickering erratically above it, and opposite the alley, another door with chains draped across it, set in a brick wall between two windows with black iron bars across them, and at the far end, steps descending into the ground.

Alexandra ran for the steps and looked down. The steps were brick at the top, but became polished stone at the edge of the shadows lurking past the light cast by the flickering bulb behind her. She couldn't see how far down they went or what was at the bottom, but she heard a distant rumble, and then felt a soft breeze push against her face from below. Could this stairwell somehow connect to the subway? She looked over her shoulder. The bulb flickered and died. She'd never seen an electric light in the Goblin Market, Charmbridge Academy, or anywhere in New Roanoke or at Croatoa. Was she in the wizarding world now, or had she crossed the border into the Muggle part of Chicago?

Anna, David, and Dylan came running out of the alley behind Alexandra. They all slowed to a halt when they saw her, and Anna and Dylan bent over to catch their breaths, while David leaned against one of the iron window grates, panting.

"What the hell?" he gasped.

Alexandra continued looking down the stairway, until Anna walked up behind her.

"What's going on?" Anna asked, sounding worried and a little frightened.

"It was him," Alexandra said.

"Okay," Anna said, "what if it was John Manuelito? Maybe he lives in Chicago now. Why would you want to meet him?"

Alexandra's fingers tightened on her wand.

John Manuelito had been the Mors Mortis Society's connection to the Dark Convention. John Manuelito had lured Darla Dearborn into the Dark Arts, and set her against Alexandra. Alexandra was convinced that he bore some responsibility for Darla's death.

Maybe as much as her.

"Can we please get out of here?" David said.

"Yes, please," Anna said.

Alexandra turned away from the tunnel and glanced at the light bulb overhead. It flickered on again, then winked out as the four of them walked beneath it. The sunlit entrance to the alley seemed blocks away, but it only took a few more paces to bring them back to the main street of the Goblin Market. Grundy's was just down the block. They merged with the pedestrians and horses and proceeded to the department store, and David and Dylan started talking about dragonscale gloves and cauldrons and measuring equipment. Alexandra didn't say anything, and was very conscious of Anna watching her silently.

By the time they finished their shopping, everyone was hungry. Since they'd agreed to eat lunch at Goody Pruett's, they left the department store and walked back along the long main avenue, passing the Chicago Broom Megastore and several Clockwork enchantment and repair shops with Clockwork dogs and cats in the window. They returned to the square outside Grobnowski's back entrance, with its large fountain and the Owl Post Office sitting on one corner, Goody Pruett's Witch-Made Pies, Cakes, and Other Confections on the other, and the Colonial Bank of the New World across the street.

Constance and Forbearance were visible through the window of Goody Pruett's, seated at a table with Benjamin and Mordecai. The two boys looked awkward and stiff. Constance and Forbearance were sipping from ice cream sodas.

"Man, they are babes," Dylan said, staring at Constance and Forbearance from across the street. "Even if they do dress like Laura Ingalls."

"Shut up," said David.

"Dude, we gotta figure out a way to get rid of Hee and Haw."

"Why are you two with us again?" Alexandra asked. She walked across the street, Anna at her side.

"I wasn't being obnoxious!" David said, following her.

Alexandra paused at the entrance to Goody Pruett's. For a moment, she stared at the name on the sign. Then she was distracted by a large, hunched shape out on the street.

"Alex?" Anna said, as Alexandra stood blocking the door. "You're acting awfully strange tod –"

The hunched figure was heading away from them, back toward the Wizardrail station. It was an old woman, stooped over and wearing tattered robes and an ancient, floppy witch's hat.

Alexandra let go of the door, ran back down the steps, and dashed down the street.

"Is she nuts?" Dylan asked.

"Alex!" Anna shouted.

Alexandra ran until she almost collided with a golden metal Clockwork golem. Veering around it, she bumped into an old wizard in a moon-and-stars robe.

"Sorry!" she said, and kept running as he muttered curses behind her – not real curses, she hoped. There was a man wearing chain armor beneath thick, black robes, leading a Hippogriff on a chain, and she would have stopped to admire the beast except the woman she was following was just about to turn down an alley. The man in armor yelled at her not to run. She ran anyway, and the Hippogriff turned its head and snapped at her. She threw herself to one side and tumbled to the street as the creature's fearsome beak snapped the air where she had just been. She leaped to her feet, scrambling away from it. Its eyes were burning as if hungry for her flesh.

"Don't run near a Hippogriff, curse you, girl!" the man in black robes said, pulling at its metal leash.

"Sorry!" she gulped, and as soon as she was safely out of the Hippogriff's reach, she ran again.

She was almost to the Wizardrail station, but the woman turned down an alley that went behind it – a different one than before. The stooped figure was walking around a greasy smear on the cobblestones and headed toward an open door through which a fire in a brick oven was visible.

"You!" Alexandra shouted. "Hilda!"

The old woman stopped, and turned around.

She was hideous, with a chin that could scrape ice and a nose that looked as if it had been screwed into her face, turned a few too many times, and then mashed in for good measure. Her mouth gaped open in astonishment, exposing two rows of square teeth with not a single ungapped pair.

It was a hag, but not the same hag Alexandra had seen twice before at the Wizardrail station, the one named Hilda. She couldn't tell if it was the same one she'd seen with John Manuelito.

The hag's look of astonishment faded; her face shifted, her eyes darted right and left before settling on Alexandra again, and she forced her mouth into a kindly smile.

"Hello dear, what's this? What can Gertrude do for you?" She leaned forward, with her large hands hanging in front of her, displaying long, long nails. Alexandra instinctively took a step back and drew her wand.

The hag's smile faltered. "Now, now, what's this, pointing a wand at an old woman?"

Alexandra sucked in a breath. Her crazy hunch seemed insane now.

"You hags, you deal in black magic, don't you?" She was still holding her wand out. With only a couple of yards between them, she realized that Gertrude was deceptively large beneath that shawl, and her movements, like the other hag she'd seen, were only outwardly those of a slow old woman.

Gertrude's yellow eyes narrowed. "Balderdash, dear. Someone's been telling you fairy tales. We're law-abiding citizens, we are." She paused. "But why ever would such a sweet child as yourself be interested in black magic?"

"Were you talking to an older boy with long, black hair earlier today? An Indian?"

The baggy flesh around the hag's eyes crinkled further. "Well, now, that would be my business, wouldn't it? After all..." She looked furtively around and lowered her voice. "You wouldn't want me telling just anyone if I spoke to you, now would you?"

"Like if you were selling illegal items? Like mistletoe wands?"

The hag stepped back. "Now, Gertrude isn't saying she knows anything about mistletoe wands, but if you're really interested in things like that, I know a cozy little hole in the wall where we can discuss it..."

"I want to know if another girl my age came to one of you," Alexandra said.

"One of us? As if we all know each other's business?" The hag threw up her hands and made a sound of exasperation. "Dear, dear – such a sweet, young child – where do you get such ideas...?"

"Alexandra!" The shout came from up the alley. Anna and David were both standing there, out of breath again. The hag drew back, pulling her shawl more tightly around herself.

"I think you and your friends must be lost, dear," Gertrude said, no longer sounding either kindly or sly. "Run along, now. Mustn't talk to strangers, you should know better."

Alexandra wanted to make her stay, but Gertrude turned away and slouched through the hole in the wall into whatever establishment was on the other side. Alexandra knew better than to follow, even if her friends weren't standing there staring at her.

She put her wand in her pocket and walked back to her friends. Anna and David looked concerned and angry.

"What is up with you?" David asked.

"Yes, that's what I'd like to know," Anna said. Her carefully-wrapped buns of hair were coming undone; strands hung around her ears. The bottom hem of her fine robes was stained. Sweat was trickling down her face.

Alexandra couldn't answer. Maybe she'd imagined seeing John Manuelito. Maybe her suspicion about where Darla got her mistletoe wand was wrong. And if she was right, what could she do about it?

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry?" David said. "Sorry for what? Acting like a crazy person?"

"Yes. For that." Alexandra began walking back toward Goody Pruett's.

The silence weighed heavily on them. Alexandra thought about her friends following her like that, not knowing where she was going or what had sent her running. Halfway to Goody Pruett's, she saw Constance and Forbearance coming up the street, with Benjamin and Mordecai at their sides, very annoyed, and Dylan trailing after them.

Constance spotted her first. "Alexandra!"

Forbearance said, "Alexandra, we'uns saw you set off like you was afire!"

Alexandra stopped in the middle of the street. She was surrounded by her friends, who had chased after her without knowing why, and for whom she had no explanation. She had a hard time meeting their eyes.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm sorry I made you worry."

"You oughter be sorry," Benjamin Rash said. "Runnin' 'bout unreg'lated makin' decent folk –"

"Shove it," David said to the Ozarker boy. "No one asked you."

Benjamin snatched his wand out of his pocket. David backed away and grabbed for his wand. Anna and Mordecai both reached for theirs.

"Benjamin!" said Constance.

"Mordecai!" said Forbearance.

"Hain't takin' no more ash from this suggin!" Benjamin snarled. He pushed Constance aside – not violently, but it was the first time Alexandra had seen one of the Rashes actually lay hands on one of the girls. David puffed up in outrage. Alexandra knew he was no dueler and wouldn't stand a chance against either of the Rashes, let alone both of them.

"Stop it," she said, stepping between them. Her wand had been out before anyone else's, and it was now pointed directly at Benjamin's nose.

Benjamin hesitated. Last year, Alexandra had beaten both of the Rashes at once in a duel. This time, she knew from his hesitation that she had already won. She dropped her wand arm to her side, and didn't flinch as Benjamin and Mordecai both held their wands pointed at her.

"Are you going to get us all in trouble by dueling in the middle of the street?" Alexandra inclined her head. Already, adults were slowing to gawk at the teens. Very deliberately, she put her wand in her pocket.

"Your little... friend started it," Benjamin said. Alexandra held a hand out, letting it smack against David's chest as he lunged forward.

"Curse me or walk away," she said, pushing David back.

"What's going on here?" A man's voice broke through the stand-off. A wizard in a red Auror's vest dropped out of the sky on a shiny black broom, landing next to the group of teens. "Any wands out on the count of three and you go to Juvenile Offenses."

He started counting – by the time he reached 'three,' all remaining wands had disappeared into their owners' pockets.

"Break it up," the Auror said. He frowned at Alexandra. "You look familiar."

"Thank you for helping us, sir," Anna said, stepping forward. She reached a hand up to brush some loose strands of hair away from her face. "What's your name, please? I'd like to tell my father, Congressman Chu, about the nice Auror who kept me and my friends from getting in trouble."

The Auror blinked uncertainly. While Anna gushed at him, the Rashes slunk away. The Pritchards followed, with worried glances over their shoulders. Dylan lingered at the edge of the street, trying to remain inconspicuous.

By the time they got to Goody Pruett's, the Ozarkers were all gone. Alexandra had witch-apple pie and plain vanilla ice cream, while David and Dylan ordered Wyland West's 99-Flavored triple-scoop sundaes, and spent lunch alternately gagging and thumping the

table over each bite of the magical ice cream. Anna ate rice cake and chocolates, and spoke little.

"So, you gonna explain what all that was about?" David asked, intruding on their thoughts. The boys had finished their ice cream, and Anna was carefully unwrapping the last of her chocolates.

Alexandra looked at Anna, whose eyes were still fixed on her chocolate, and then David. "Later," she said.

A tense silence hung in the air after that. Ignored by everyone else, Dylan was looking out the window at passersby on the street. "Hey, it's a goblin!" he said. "You ever notice that you never see goblin chicks?"

Even Dylan wasn't talking much by the time all the Charmbridge students gathered at the back entrance to Grobnowski's Old World Deli. On the bus, Dylan joined another group of boys, while David sat down across the table from Alexandra and Anna.

When the Pritchards arrived, the Rashes were following behind them.

"You'uns oughter come sit with us," Benjamin said.

"No, thankee," said Constance.

"I'm tryin' to say it mannerly," Benjamin said.

"You was mannerly, Benjamin. But we'uns prefer to sit with our friends."

Benjamin's brother said, "Please, you'uns know your Pa told us to keep you outter trouble."

Forbearance turned to him. "What trouble do you see here, Mordecai?" She wrapped an arm around Innocence's shoulders, and put a hand over the younger girl's mouth.

"We'uns are stayin'," Constance said.

Benjamin scowled. "Your folks 're gonna hear 'bout this."

Glowing, the Rashes pushed past them and went up the stairs. Constance sat down and slid across the seat until she was next to David.

"Innocence, dear, go sit with your friends," Forbearance said. "We'uns need to talk."

"What?" Innocence exclaimed.

"Don't quarrel," Constance said.

To Alexandra's surprise, Innocence only pouted for a few seconds, before slinking back up the aisle to join the other seventh graders.

Forbearance sat next to Constance, and all of them looked at Alexandra.

Constance spoke first. "Alex, dear, we'uns are awful concerned 'bout you."

"You don't have to be," Alexandra said.

"So you aren't seeing Dark Wizards and chasing after hags and acting nuts?" David asked.

"You said you'd explain later," Anna said.

"I didn't think you were going to ambush me on the bus," Alexandra said. "You're making a big deal out of nothing."

The bus was moving through downtown Chicago now, on its way to the Automagicka. It was noisy – in the booth behind them, Janet Jackson was giggling with her friends as they tested some new wandless cosmetic charms. There was a loud crack followed by a yelp of pain from where the tenth graders were sitting, and Mrs. Speaks yelled over the tumult at Torvald.

The quiet that hung over Alexandra's table felt to her like a silent interrogation.

A Secret Keeper, she thought. She carried so many secrets. It had become second nature not to tell anyone.

"Don't you think you can trust us?" Anna asked.

"It's not like that," Alexandra said.

"You saved Innocence's life," Forbearance said. "You know there hain't nothin' you can't tell us."

"You have no idea," Alexandra said. "You really don't."

"Give us an idear," Constance said.

Alexandra took out her wand, hesitated, then said, "Muffliato."

"What's that spell?" David asked.

"It prevents anyone from eavesdropping on us," Alexandra said.

David snorted. "Paranoid much?"

Alexandra stared him down until he stopped smiling, then she spoke, so quietly that her friends had to lean forward to hear.

"There are secrets," she said, "that people get Obliviated to protect. If I tell you, I'll be putting you in danger. If you tell anyone else, even your parents, you'll put them in danger."

Constance and Forbearance turned toward one another in silent communion. Anna grew pale. David clenched his fists on the table uncertainly.

"Please, just let it go," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry I've been acting strange. I don't want to keep secrets from you, but I don't want you endangered, either."

After a long silence, David said, "So it's okay for you to be endangered?"

"Better me than you and me and everyone else," Alexandra said.

"Alex..." Anna whispered.

"I trust all of you," Alexandra said. "But you can't help."

"How do you know that?" Constance asked.

"You ain't gave us a chance to try," Forbearance said.

Alexandra shook her head. "And if I tell you something you can't do anything about, something you can't talk about with anyone else?" She leaned back against her seat. "If you ask me next week, when we're in school... I'll tell you what I can. But think about it first. Really think about it. I'm asking you, as my friends, to drop it."

It wasn't likely. She saw it in their faces. They were her friends, and they wanted to help.

A Murder of Crows

On the September morning that Alexandra stood outside waiting for the bus to Charmbridge Academy, her mother and stepfather were both there to see her off, for the first time since sixth grade. Alexandra felt awkward and annoyed, especially with the other kids down the street waiting at the regular bus stop. Archie's presence, in his police uniform, kept Billy and his friends from issuing their usual taunts, but did nothing to reduce Alexandra's embarrassment.

Brian was standing on the corner, and Bonnie as well. Bonnie, who was starting middle school, stood apart from her brother and seemed to be making a point of not associating with him as she talked to other sixth grade girls. Brian looked at Alexandra. For a moment, she thought he might wave to her. Then another boy said something to him, and he turned away to talk to him.

No, you wouldn't want anyone to think you're friends with the freak, Alexandra thought.

The short yellow Charmbridge bus came around the corner, provoking hoots and jeers from most of the kids on the corner. Alexandra thought it was lucky for them that none of the kids inside dared toss curses out the window.

Her mother embarrassed her even more by giving her a full hug, right in front of everyone.

"I don't want anything bad to happen to you," her mother said.

"I don't always have control over that, Mom." Alexandra wondered how her mother could choose here and now to suddenly become emotional?

"You can stay out of trouble."

"I'll try."

Archie let out a long sigh and put a hand on his stepdaughter's shoulder.

"You have no idea how much your mother worries about you," he said.

"Archie." Claudia's mild reproach silenced him.

Then he said, "Stay out of trouble."

"I will, Archie," Alexandra said.

"I mean actually stay out of trouble."

"I will, Archie."

He grunted and released her. Her face unusually hot, Alexandra boarded the bus, avoiding as many eyes as possible. Anna and the Pritchards were already at Charmbridge; this trip was just to collect 'local' students from Central Territory.

They reached Detroit and picked up David, then zoomed along the Automagicka to Cleveland. David only talked about the usual topics: school, their familiars (his falcon, Malcolm, sat in a veiled cage next to Charlie's open one), and what they had done in their last week of summer. Alexandra was sure David was thinking about their last conversation, but he didn't bring it up. When they reached Cleveland, Dylan boarded the bus and joined them.

Dylan spent most of the trip talking about girls. To shut him up, Alexandra opened a pack of Exploding Snap cards, and they played until Malcolm became so disturbed by the pops and cracks that David suggested wizard chess instead. He and Alexandra played while Dylan kibitzed.

Between cities, the Automagicka was a black ribbon that folded space beneath the wheels of the vehicles that traveled upon it and made distances impossibly short. But the long, winding mountain road that led to the Invisible Bridge was an ordinary Muggle highway, and when the Charmbridge bus ascended it, everyone began packing up games, food, books, and whatever else they had spread on their tables or scattered in the aisle. A steady, nervous drone came from the sixth graders as they approached their destination. This would be their first time across the Invisible Bridge, and their first sight of Charmbridge Academy.

Alexandra and David, having been across the Invisible Bridge many times now, continued their chess game. When they reached the high

bluff at the top of the mountain road, David had almost checkmated her.

"Too bad we don't have time to finish," Alexandra said.

David grinned. "This is a restorable chess set. I bought it at Grundy's. We can finish later."

Dylan high-fived David. "Owned!"

Alexandra gathered her things. "Like you even know how to play chess."

"I know how," Dylan said.

"You suck," David said.

While the boys bantered, Alexandra got off the bus, carrying Charlie's cage in one hand and Nigel's in the other. The straps of her backpack were cinched around her shoulders, and she had her broom awkwardly tucked under one arm.

The bus was parked at a turn-off overlooking a long, winding river valley that stretched into the distance north and south. Before them was a bluff terminating in a steep, vertical cliff. It was nearly a mile to the rocky red cliffs on the other side of the valley, and there was nothing between them but the deep chasm, with the tree-lined river half a mile below. It was this valley that kept Muggles away from Charmbridge Academy.

The Charmbridge students lined up at the edge of the cliff. The brand new sixth graders, especially the Muggle-borns, eyed the gap nervously. Some of them looked at Alexandra. She was one of only a handful of students carrying a broom, and most of the others were senior chaperones.

"You may not fly across the valley, Miss Quick," Mrs. Speaks told her. "You have to walk across the Invisible Bridge like everyone else."

"I know," Alexandra said. Belatedly, she added, "Ma'am."

Some of the sixth graders gasped as older students began stepping off the cliff and walking across the valley as if on air.

"Now, it's perfectly safe," Mrs. Speaks said to the nervous eleven-year-olds. "The Invisible Bridge is charmed against wind, rain, snow, and other weather conditions, and there has never been – err, almost never – that is, no one has ever accidentally slipped off."

As Alexandra approached the bridge, she saw William Killmond standing far to the rear, sweating a little. He had crossed the bridge several times last year, but it obviously still made him anxious.

"C'mon, William," she said. "Help me carry my broom."

The seventh grader blinked at her, then dashed forward ahead of his classmates. "Yes, ma'am!"

"Don't call me that. This isn't JROC." She lifted her arm and allowed him to take her broom from her. "Don't drop it or I'll throw you after it."

He gulped and his chubby fingers clenched the broomstick in a death grip. Behind her, David and Dylan grinned.

William was obviously making an effort not to look down as they strode across the Invisible Bridge. Alexandra was unbothered by the height. She had fallen from the Invisible Bridge. She wasn't afraid of the bridge, but she was always just a little bit wary while crossing it. Behind her, David – who had fallen with her – was walking with exaggerated ease.

"Check it out, some sixth grader is crying like a baby," Dylan said, looking back at the Muggle side of the valley where the bus and the younger students were.

William flushed, and Alexandra said, "Shut up, Dylan."

"What?" Dylan said, and then David said, "Dang, that's a lotta crows. Friends of yours, Charlie?"

"Charlie's a raven, not a crow," Charlie said from the cage in Alexandra's hand. Alexandra looked where David was indicating. There was indeed an immense flock of crows pouring out of the

trees at the far side of the valley, not far from where the Invisible Bridge touched the opposite cliff.

"That is a lot of crows," Dylan said.

The crows continued to stream out of the forest like a great black tide. By now the noise of their cawing and flapping wings was drowning out conversations on the bridge, and everyone was staring at them.

Ravens and crows were considered unlucky birds in the wizarding world. Whenever crows gathered, superstitious witches and wizards told ridiculous stories about Dark Arts and warlocks. Alexandra's raven familiar (and her father's) hadn't helped her reputation.

"They're, uh, coming this way," William said.

"Crows are harmless," Alexandra said.

"Wicked, wicked!" Charlie squawked, suddenly flapping hard enough to swing the cage back and forth in Alexandra's hand.

"You're not helping, Charlie," she said.

"They are coming this way," David said.

Alexandra realized with horror that they were. From where she stood, midway across the Invisible Bridge, it was as if a maelstrom of beaks and claws and black feathers were reaching out to engulf her. The crows, in a vast, dark multitude, came screeching and cawing and shrieking directly at her.

The older students ahead of them on the bridge ducked and cowered as the birds swarmed around them, but the crows ignored them. Alexandra looked behind her. It was all younger kids, except for David and Dylan at her back.

Then the crows were upon her, their beaks and talons slashing and stabbing. Alexandra stumbled back and dropped into a crouch. Her instinct was to hold up her arms to protect her face, but she was still holding Charlie's and Nigel's cages, so she put her head between her knees instead, and felt beaks stabbing her hands and claws tearing at her neck and hair. The beating of wings was a physical

force that almost knocked her over, and then the feathery horde was past her, except for a few stragglers who flapped against her. She rose on shaky feet as the sinister flock turned as one in the air high above the valley, preparing to engulf her again.

David and Dylan had also acquired a few scratches, and William's face was pale beneath bright red gouges across his cheek and forehead.

Alexandra dropped her familiars' cages in front of the short, round boy, and snatched her broom out of his hands.

"Take Charlie and Nigel," she said to him. He stared at her as the beating of wings once more began to drown out words. "Do it!"

He grabbed the cages, looking stunned and terrified.

Someone was yelling "Don't panic!" There were teachers and seniors casting Shield Charms at both ends of the bridge, but where Alexandra stood, they were unprotected.

"Run!" she yelled. "All of you!"

"We can't leave you!" David said. Dylan had already started running.

Alexandra gave David a shove toward William. "I said run!" Then the birds were upon her again. She held up her arms to protect her face. Beaks and claws slashed her all over and pulled her hair. There were screams and cries from either end of the bridge, but Alexandra was at the center of the attacking crows, and this time, they weren't passing her by and circling around. She was beset by them, and they almost took her off her feet. If they didn't peck her to death, they might suffocate her in their midst.

Blind and bleeding, she leaped off the bridge with crows clutching her clothes and hair.

Someone screamed her name. She dropped at a frightening speed, wind tearing at her and the crows alike. One after another they fell away. The trees and the river spun up at her as she plummeted toward the valley floor trailing black birds in her wake.

Her hands still gripped her broom, and without knowing how far she'd fallen, she pulled it against her body, wrapped her legs around it, felt the familiar stabilizing and cushioning charms laid across the hard broomstick, and pulled up. Her downward flight ceased, and with stomach-lurching suddenness, she began to rise. She dared to open her eyes, and saw the river fifty feet below her, and a black cloud blocking the sky above.

Shrieking and cawing, the crows dove at her. Alexandra zoomed forward, leading the flock as she began arcing out over the valley. The crows couldn't keep up with her Twister, but they didn't stop chasing her. When she looked back, she saw tiny figures on brooms high in the air receding behind her, but she couldn't turn back toward the Invisible Bridge without going through the murderous crows.

"I'm sorry," she said, and pointed her wand at the pursuing horde.

She cast a fireball that went flaming into their midst. They shrieked and scattered. Alexandra winced as she saw feathery bodies plummeting to the ground in flames.

Charlie was a raven, not a crow, but these birds weren't so different from her familiar. She didn't like killing them, and she knew they hadn't decided to try to kill her on their own. But she couldn't return to the Invisible Bridge or fly to Charmbridge Academy with them still chasing her.

She tried throwing volleys of sharp quills and conjuring buzzing hornets as she continued weaving her way down the valley keeping just ahead of the birds, but this had little effect on the flock. Twice more, she hurled fireballs right through their midst, killing more crows in the process. After the second salvo, whether it was because of the fire or the distance they had pursued her, the crows dispersed in all directions. The flock exploded apart, separating into individual birds fleeing east and west, north and south, leaving a cloud of black feathers drifting down toward the valley. None of the birds renewed their assault, even when Alexandra warily reversed course and began flying back toward the bridge.

She was met halfway there by Ms. Fletcher, the Charmbridge groundskeeper, and Ms. Shirtliffe, the magical theory instructor and JROC commander. Behind the two older witches were a couple of

seniors on their brooms, but it looked as if the adults had ordered them to stay near the bridge.

"You shouldn't have flown off like that," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "We could have dispersed those birds if you hadn't flown out of range."

"Oh, really? Before or after they pecked me to death?" Alexandra wiped a tattered sleeve across her face. It came away streaked with blood.

"You should know better than to take off in a panic," Ms. Fletcher tutted. "If you're in trouble, stay where you are and let adults –"

"Did you miss the part about being pecked to death?"

"Well..." Ms. Fletcher's voice trailed off. She was a large woman in a cloak and sash, much more imposing than Ms. Shirtliffe, but she looked quite unsettled.

"Can you fly back to the bridge on the Charmbridge side of the valley?" Ms. Shirtliffe asked. She had descended to hover side by side with Alexandra.

"Sure." Now that she was no longer in danger, Alexandra's arms felt shaky, and she was becoming aware of the wounds all over her body. She raised a hand to her ear, and found her earring was still there, but her fingers came away bloody. Ms. Shirtliffe's face was scarred – Alexandra had never heard how – and it made her wonder if her own face would be after this.

Ms. Shirtliffe watched her carefully as they flew to where a crowd of students had gathered. Everyone was across the bridge, but the sixth graders were plainly terrified; from their tear-streaked faces, it had probably not been easy getting them across. Some of the older kids looked frightened, too.

Alexandra stumbled a little as she landed and dismounted. Before Ms. Shirtliffe could grab her, she walked to where William was standing. He had Charlie's and Nigel's cages clutched to his chest so tightly he was bending the bars.

"Alexandra!" Charlie squawked, beating hard against the inside of the cage. Alexandra opened the door to free the raven, who circled around them and then landed on her shoulder.

Inside his cage, Nigel was coiled and agitated, his tongue darting rapidly in and out. Alexandra gently pried the snake's cage loose from William's fingers.

"Thank you, William," she said.

He nodded frantically.

Ms. Shirtliffe said, "Quick, come here."

Alexandra stood up. David ran over to her. He grimaced at her torn, bedraggled appearance. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He looked down at the cage in his arms, still covered with a black cloth. "I almost let Malcolm loose –"

"What, you think one falcon could single-handedly take on a murder of crows?" She shook her head. "Thanks for the thought, though."

"Quick!" Shirtliffe said, more sharply.

Everyone else was looking at her with apprehension, if they dared look at her at all. Just before turning around to go to Ms. Shirtliffe, Alexandra saw one pair of eyes that was neither afraid nor looking away.

Mary Dearborn was staring at her with dark, unblinking eyes. Alexandra met her gaze, until Ms. Shirtliffe called a third time, and then she went to the adults, who insisted on making her lie on a flying carpet to be carried to the academy, despite her insistence that she could walk.

Alexandra sat on a bed in the infirmary while Mrs. Murphy, the school nurse, smeared salve over all of her wounds. None of them were deep; the multitude of pecks and scratches had left her covered with blood, but not seriously injured. They hurt a lot, though.

Alexandra's clothes were shredded, and she imagined she would have been, too, had she given the crows more time to work on her.

When Lilith Grimm entered the infirmary, Alexandra started, for a moment thinking it was her sister Diana. She laughed at the irony of being relieved that it was just the Dean.

"You seem to be in good spirits, Miss Quick," the Dean said.

"I guess, ma'am." Alexandra winced as Mrs. Murphy touched her wand to the raw place where a crow had torn at her earlobe.

"This is the first year you've wound up in the infirmary on your first day."

"Not the first year someone has tried to kill me on my first day, though."

Alexandra fell silent after that, Ms. Grimm's slate gray eyes forestalling further comments.

Mrs. Murphy sealed her bottle of salve. "Nothing serious, Miss Quick. I imagine it was scarier when it happened."

"It certainly was serious, Mrs. Murphy. Miss Quick was lucky to escape – ensorcelled crows can be deadly."

"Well, I'm certainly glad she did escape. Just keep those scratches clean." Mrs. Murphy plucked a small feather out of Alexandra's hair. She looked between the girl and the Dean. "I have to check on some of the younger students – they were rather upset at witnessing what happened."

Alexandra was silent as the elderly red-headed Healer walked away.

"Do you have any idea who might be trying to kill you, Miss Quick?" Ms. Grimm asked.

"This time?"

"Yes. This time." Ms. Grimm didn't smile.

"The Dark Convention, John Manuelito, Mary Dearborn – what is she doing at Charmbridge, anyway? Oh, and wasn't there someone else hanging around here who tried to kill me and summoned a murder of crows?"

Ms. Grimm's expression didn't change. "Mr. Journey is a ghost. He couldn't be responsible. But rest assured, I'll be speaking to him. I doubt Miss Dearborn is capable of magic of that magnitude. I have spoken to her and her parents, and I realize her attending Charmbridge Academy this year will be... difficult for both of you. I'll tell you the same thing I told her: try to avoid one another. As for John Manuelito..." Now a note of bemusement entered Ms. Grimm's voice. "I believe he returned to Dinétah after he was expelled. Why would you suspect him?"

"I saw him in the Goblin Market."

"You're certain?"

Alexandra hesitated. "I think so."

"Well, he is no longer a student here, and we will know if outsiders trespass on school grounds. In that light, please do avoid wandering out of bounds or exploring forbidden areas this year, Miss Quick. I'll be keeping a very close eye on your activities and your comings and goings – for your own safety, of course."

"Of course," Alexandra muttered. She waited, and when Ms. Grimm said nothing else, she assumed she was free to go. She stood up, and paused, before looking at Ms. Grimm in surprise.

The Dean arched an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"You're actually taking me seriously," Alexandra said.

"Someone cursed you with a murder of crows – of course I'm taking it seriously."

"And... you're not going to get more letters demanding you expel me because I'm endangering other students?"

"Worry about yourself, Miss Quick."

"Yes, ma'am." Confused and uneasy, Alexandra left the infirmary.

Her dorm room, which she had shared with Anna since sixth grade, was in Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall. All the girls in her year had rooms in this second-floor hallway. To get there, she had to walk through the main part of the school. She always attracted stares and whispers, but they usually weren't quite this bad on the first day of her arrival. Knowing how rumors spread at Charmbridge, she was quite aware that by now, everyone knew about the incident at the Invisible Bridge. Even if they didn't, her appearance – cuts covered with bandages and tattered clothing beneath the robe Mrs. Murphy had lent her – would draw attention.

"Welcome back, Miss Quick," said the wizard who hung in a portrait frame at the entrance to her hall. He was fat and bearded and usually looked at passing students with deep suspicion, even when they were just going to and from class.

"Hi," she said. She wondered if portraits exchanged gossip too, and if he had heard about her encounter with the crows. At least he didn't ask what had happened to her. She continued to her room.

Anna had already unpacked her things and set up her side of the room when Alexandra arrived. Anna had opened Charlie's cage, but the raven wasn't leaving it while Anna's great horned owl, Jingwei, was sitting in her own cage with the door open. When Alexandra entered the room, the raven cawed: "Alexandra!"

Anna jumped to her feet. "Alex, I heard –" Her eyes widened when she saw the state of her roommate's clothing, and the glistening red smears and bandages covering her skin.

"It looks worse than it is," Alexandra said.

Anna looked like she wanted to give Alexandra a hug, but was afraid to. Alexandra put a hand on Anna's shoulder. "I'm fine, really."

"Did you really get attacked by a murder of crows?"

"Yes."

"That's Dark Arts!"

"Yes."

"Someone tried to kill you?"

"Yes."

Anna's eyes were wide. "What are we going to do?"

Alexandra sat down on her bed. "I don't know."

"Well, we'll have to talk about it, then."

Alexandra noted the conviction in Anna's voice. "We?"

"Me and David and Constance and Forbearance."

Alexandra sighed. "Look, Anna, I appreciate it, but if someone is trying to kill me –"

"– then you're going to run around trying to figure out who all by yourself and not telling anyone? I don't think so." Anna folded her arms.

"I don't want you –"

"– putting ourselves in danger? Too bad. We've all talked about this. We want to know what's going on, and we're not letting you do everything alone."

"Don't I have a say in this?"

"No."

Alexandra gave her a narrow look, and Anna's determination faltered.

"We decided," Anna said softly. "Honestly, do you really not want us to help you?"

"I..." Alexandra's throat was dry. "I don't know."

"Alexandra," Charlie said.

Alexandra reached into the cage and took Charlie out. Jingwei opened one eye and hooted. Alexandra watched the owl as she held Charlie in her arms. "I don't want anyone else getting hurt."

"Neither do we." Anna inspected Alexandra's pants legs, now torn and ragged. "I don't know any good mending charms, but I'll bet the Pritchards do."

"Mending my clothes isn't exactly what I need help with."

"Could have fooled me."

Alexandra let go of Charlie, who fluttered back into the protection of the cage by her bed. "All right. So just what else did you all decide?"

"We're going to talk about it after dinner tonight." Anna regarded her with a serious expression. "You know, maybe you should teach us how to cast that Muffliato spell."

A knock came on the door to the bathroom that Alexandra and Anna shared with their adjoining roommates, Sonja Rackham and Carol Queen. Before they could say anything, Sonja, a pretty, red-haired girl whose nosiness had apparently not been curbed even after being cursed by Darla the previous year, opened the door and entered their room.

"Hi!" Sonja said, with forced cheerfulness. Her eyes widened when she saw Alexandra, who by now had changed clothes, but still bore bandages up and down her arms and face. "Holy Moses! You did get attacked by a flock of seagulls!"

"Seagulls?" Alexandra forgot to be annoyed at Sonja's intrusion, and burst out laughing.

"They were crows," Anna said.

"Oh." Sonja watched Alexandra as if doubting her sanity, until Alexandra stopped laughing. "So, um, you're all right? Who cursed you?"

"I don't know," Alexandra said. "You should really stop barging in here. You might get cursed again."

"Darla's..." Sonja bit her tongue.

Alexandra wiggled her wand. "I meant by me."

Sonja's eyes went wide again. "Well, fine, be like that!" She slammed the door shut.

"Threatening to curse people isn't going to help your reputation any," Anna said.

"Like my reputation can get any worse?"

A hush fell over the cafeteria when Alexandra and Anna entered. Usually the first evening's meal, the Friday before school started, was the noisiest of the year, as students who hadn't seen each other all summer sat together, so the sudden quiet was all the more pronounced.

The cafeteria was large enough to hold the entire student body, with long tables stretching the length of the room. The ceiling glowed with magical light, and beneath it students lined up at buffet counters where Clockwork golems dished food onto their plates. Now the Clockworks continued serving food, oblivious to the stillness in the air and the distraction of the students holding trays in front of them, but from one end of the cafeteria to the other, across the benches full of robed, feathered, cloaked, veiled, and gowned students, silence reigned.

To Alexandra's relief, it didn't take long for voices to pick up again. She walked past the eleventh graders' table, waiting for Larry Albo to say something like he usually did. When she glanced at him, his eyes flickered in her direction, but there was no break in his conversation with his friends. At the same table, the Rashes watched her, faces set in stone.

Alexandra and Anna stood in line for their meals, then carried their trays to where Constance and Forbearance were sitting. Other ninth graders were at the table as well, but no one was sitting next to the Ozarkers.

"Alex, dear, we was fixin' to hunt you up if you didn't come to table," Constance said.

"We've heard what happened. Are you alright?" Forbearance eyed Alexandra's injuries with concern. "Is Ms. Grimm gonna do somethin' to protect you?"

"There's awful mischief afoot," Constance said.

"Yeah," Alexandra said, "I understand you all have been talking about me and deciding what to do with me."

Constance's voice faltered. "Hain't like that, Alexandra."

"No?" Alexandra turned to Anna, who was inspecting her baked blue ham very, very carefully.

"I reckon this hain't the proper place to converse," Forbearance whispered.

"Specially since David's over there with them other boys," Constance muttered. David, seated at the end of the table with the other ninth grade boys, noticed their attention was on him and waved two fingers.

"Right," Alexandra said dryly, "we need everyone on the Alexandra Committee together."

Anna coughed. Constance and Forbearance lowered their gazes. They didn't talk much for the rest of the meal, until Anna said, "So where can we go?"

Alexandra tapped her fork against the table in irritation. The other three girls waited expectantly.

"Not the rec room," she said at last. The lounges available for each grade level were usually full of students studying, playing games, or listening to the Wizard Wireless. Alexandra supposed they could sit on a couch and have a private conversation with the Muffliato spell, but it might attract notice.

"It's still warm out," Anna said. "And we have about an hour before curfew. We could take a walk outside."

The Pritchards looked nervous.

"We can stay close to the academy," Alexandra said, "in case any more crows show up."

She hadn't intended sarcasm, but she felt guilty when the Pritchards blushed. They nodded, however, and the four of them walked out of the cafeteria together, lingering to wait for David to join them.

It was Benjamin and Mordecai, however, who followed practically on their heels. The Rashes looked furious and determined, and Constance and Forbearance stepped back in alarm as the boys walked up to them.

Benjamin said, "We'uns tried to leave be like you'uns asked, but we can't abide you consortin' with a sorceress no longer. How much more proof you need that she draws misery an' woe an' ill works?"

Before Alexandra could utter a retort, Mordecai addressed her directly. "Girl, can't you see you're placin' your friends in a hazard? If you really care for Constance and Forbearance, you oughter keep away from 'em."

"Mordecai Rash," Forbearance exclaimed, "how dare you?"

"It's true." Benjamin's eyes burned a baleful blue. "Every year you're the reason for some calamity, hain't you, Miss Quick? Every year, someone dies."

Constance and Forbearance gasped, but Benjamin kept going. "Could be it hain't really your fault – no one picks their daddy – but that's the way it sits. You're fated an' cursed, like Troublesome herself. Even furriners can see it. What you gonna do when one o' your friends is struck?"

Alexandra was so stunned and angry, she would have whipped out her wand and challenged Benjamin to a duel on the spot if not for all the students around them. In fact, those leaving the cafeteria were now beginning to congest around the entrance, sensing a fight brewing.

But doubt churned in her stomach, as did the memory of seeing Bonnie Seabury – not really Bonnie, but a Boggart reflecting her fears back at her – bloated and dead, killed because she'd gotten too close to Alexandra.

"So is she supposed to have no friends?" Anna demanded.

"If'n you wants to consort with her and take your chances, hain't no concern of ours," Mordecai said.

"Hain't your concern neither if we consort with her!" Forbearance spoke with more anger than Alexandra had ever heard from her.

Mordecai was taken aback, and even Benjamin paused a moment before saying quietly, "Yes, it is."

"What's going on here?" David pushed through the crowd forming a circle around them, and looked angrily at Benjamin. "Why don't you stop harassing my girls?"

"Your girls?" everyone exclaimed.

David faltered. "It's just an expression... it doesn't mean my girls –"

"What business you got here –" Benjamin said, and before his sneering lips could form the next syllable, another voice broke in.

"What's going on here?" This time it was Mr. Adams, a Magical Theory teacher, and one of the chaperones in the cafeteria that evening. Drawn to the gathering of students exchanging angry words out in the hallway, he towered over them in his black felt hat and plain black jacket and breeches, his expression severe and tight-lipped. "Trouble, Miss Quick?"

"No, sir," Alexandra said.

"She is trouble," Benjamin muttered, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Mr. Adams said, "Believe it or not, we teachers do not actually enjoy detention duty, especially not during the first week of classes. So I advise all of you to disperse, immediately."

Alexandra walked away, and her friends followed, leaving the Rashes glowering behind them. The onlookers trickled away in all directions. Alexandra abruptly changed course. After a moment, David asked, "Where are we going?"

Alexandra pointed. Instead of going outside onto the lawn, she chose an exit into the school's inner courtyard. Charmbridge Academy was arranged as a seven-sided building with an open heptagonal space in its center. There were trees and benches and tables there, but it was an uninteresting spot that students mostly crossed through on their way to classes in different wings of the academy. When the five ninth graders walked out into the courtyard, there was one couple sitting under a tree on the far side. They didn't look as if they wanted to be disturbed, nor did they show much interest in the younger students. Alexandra walked to the table furthest from the couple, and turned to face her friends, folding her arms across her chest.

"All right, let's get something straight," she said. "Anna told me what you 'decided.' And I'm grateful, really. It means a lot to me that you want to help. But there's nothing you can do that won't endanger you. Not that I care what the Rashes think, but they're not wrong."

"You're kidding," David said.

Speaking in a quieter voice, Alexandra said, "Every time I involve other people, they're the ones who get hurt. So please, it's enough for you to be my friends. That's all I want."

No one said anything for a minute. Then Constance cleared her throat. "Would you please cast that charm of yours, Alex? Muffle-ato?"

Alexandra sighed and took out her wand. "Muffliato."

The Pritchards spoke first.

"We'uns harkened what you said," Forbearance said.

"It's your right to keep secrets," Constance said.

"But we'uns'll stand by you irregardless."

"And listen to whatever you been feared to tell us."

"We believe you when you say it's dangerous," Anna said. "We understand the risks."

Alexandra shook her head. "No, you don't."

"Well then, tell us," David said.

They were all so serious, so earnest. They didn't understand the danger, but they knew it was dangerous, and that didn't deter them. Alexandra slowly scanned the courtyard, while emotion welled up inside her.

"What I tell you, you can't tell anyone else," she said. "If you do, the Bureau of Obliviation will Obliviate you, and anyone you tell, and then they'll probably imprison me on Eerie Isle for being a Dark sorceress." She looked up, as if expecting to find crows watching from the edge of the roof.

"We ain't gonna tell," David said. "You know that."

Alexandra took her gaze off the roof. Her friends waited, with hushed breath and wide eyes, but even the threat of Obliviation hadn't scared them. She felt her throat constrict, even as the urge to speak overwhelmed her.

"This is about why my father is the Enemy of the Confederation," she said. "It's why I'm an enemy of the Confederation."

Anna's face drained of color, and Constance and Forbearance put their hands to their chests.

"You still think you want to hear this?" Alexandra asked.

They looked at each other. Slowly, Anna and David nodded, and Constance said, "We'uns'll swear ourselves to secrecy with an Unbreakable Vow if'n that's what you want, Alexandra."

"No!" Alexandra shook her head violently. "I told you, I trust you."

"Then tell us," Anna said.

Alexandra paced about for a moment, and no one said anything.

When she stopped pacing, she began talking.

The Alexandra Committee

She told them everything.

She wasn't sure when she began how much she would tell them, but once she started talking, it all came out. Maximilian's sacrifice. The Deathly Regiment. Alexandra's promise to the Generous Ones. Her friends listened wordlessly, their expressions of curious apprehension slowly turning to shock and horror.

She sat down when she was finished, emotionally drained. "Now you know."

"You should have told us before," Anna said. She was crying.

"What could you have done?"

Anna sat bolt upright. "My father! He's a Congressman! Please, let me tell him about the Deathly Regiment, and –"

"Anna," Alexandra said gently, "your father already knows about the Deathly Regiment. Everyone in the Wizards' Congress does. He told me not to tell you."

Anna's eyes widened in disbelief. "My father... he knows?"

"He said he wants to end it. There are others in the Wizards' Congress who do, too. But you can't tell him you know, Anna."

Anna put a hand over her mouth.

Constance took a deep breath. "Alexandra, can you teach us your Muffliato spell?"

"Why?" Alexandra asked.

"How else are we'uns gonna conspire?" Constance asked.

"We're gonna need to keep our skirts in if'n we're talkin' 'bout vows an' Geases," Forbearance said.

"Yeah, and we definitely need secrecy for talking about the Deathly Regiment," David said.

Anna removed her hand from her mouth. "And while we're figuring out who's trying to kill you."

Alexandra gaped at them. "Did any of you hear anything I just told you?"

"Every word," said Forbearance.

"You want to keep acting as hard-headed as always," David said.

"Stubborn, high-headed mule," Constance said.

"And just what do you think you can do?" Alexandra asked.

"Forbearance an' I been learnin' works they don't teach at Charmbridge," Constance said. She and her sister exchanged looks.

"We'uns can't talk 'bout it," Forbearance said.

"It's Ozarker magic. We'uns hain't even s'posed to let on to... to y'all –"

"Foreigners," Alexandra said.

"Furriners." Constance nodded and lowered her head. "Mysteries is a secret."

"But maybe we'uns can learn somethin' bout Geases."

"What's a Geas?"

"It's what them Generous Ones laid on you," Constance said.

"A sort of oath," Forbearance said.

Alexandra shook her head. "I've never heard of them."

"Well, that shows you could use some help with your research," Anna said. "If you'd told me what you were really studying last year, all those hours you spent in the library..."

"And you could've taught us some of those bad-ass spells your brother taught you," David said.

"Tsk," Constance said.

Alexandra shook her head. "I don't think it's going to be that easy."

"We'uns din't say nothin' would be easy," Constance said.

"You've got seven years, right?" Anna clasped one of Alexandra's hands in her own. "In that time, with all of us working on it, we'll find some way to save you."

"And hopefully find out who sicced those crows on you before that," David said.

Alexandra looked at each of them in turn. "But..." She swallowed. "What happened in sixth grade, to Anna. And then Max. And Innocence, and Darla..."

"You can't carry everyone's bucket, Alexandra," Constance said softly.

"You hain't responsible for ev'ry calamity," Forbearance said.

"And maybe if you had let us help earlier, things might have –" Anna stopped, as Alexandra winced. "Oh, no, Alex! I didn't mean it that way!"

Alexandra saw Darla's face as she disappeared into the Lands Beyond, and Maximilian falling, falling into the darkness... She shook her head. "I know you didn't, Anna."

"We decided," Constance said, in the tense silence that followed, "that we'uns is gonna help you. You hain't the only one who can learn arts outside o' class."

"Or read books," Forbearance said.

"But you gots to let us help."

"We know if you fix it in your head to go off on your lonesome, we'uns can't stop you."

"Please, Alex," Anna said, "it's because we love you."

Her face was unbearably earnest. Constance and Forbearance nodded.

David shifted uncomfortably. He was sitting on the table with his feet on the bench next to Anna, and his hands placed to either side of him on the flat stone tabletop. "I ain't saying I love you. Don't get any ideas."

"Aw, I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about skinny white girls," Alexandra said.

David snorted. "Not a chance."

Constance turned to him. "David Washington, I had no idea you despise white girls."

"I don't!" he protested. "Skinny white girls doesn't mean you."

Constance opened her mouth and put her hands on her hips, and David stammered: "No, wait – that's not what I—"

Alexandra said, "Keep digging, dork."

"She's totally trying to change the subject!" David said. "Real funny, Alex – get us talking about anything but you and your hard head!"

They all turned back to her.

Alexandra sighed. "All right." She lowered her eyes, and whispered, "Thank you."

Anna beamed, still holding Alexandra's hand.

"But you guys can't get in trouble because of me," Alexandra said. "And no risking danger, or expulsion."

"Right, no problem," David said. "We'll just research Dark Arts and the Confederation's freaking child sacrifice program, but let's not do anything that could get us in trouble."

Alexandra pulled her hand out of Anna's grasp. "I mean it."

"So what do we do first?" Anna asked.

Alexandra scratched her chin. "Do you really think there's a way to break a... Geas?"

The Pritchards looked at each other, in that way they did just before they began speaking together.

"We'uns hain't learned much that 'wise," Constance said.

"But Geases is powerful magic," Forbearance said.

"We'uns reckon if a curse can be broke, so can a Geas."

"But that kind of magic could take years an' years to learn."

Alexandra nodded. She was afraid of that.

"We got seven," Forbearance said. "We best get started."

"You're serious," Alexandra said, staring at her.

"Course we is." The twins stood up.

"Wait a minute!" David said to Alexandra. "Aren't you going to teach us that Muffliato spell?"

"I will," Alexandra said. "But not tonight. There's someone else I need to talk to."

They went inside. Constance and Forbearance said that they should say goodnight to Innocence, and gave Alexandra and Anna both kisses on the cheek. David folded his arms and smiled at them.

"Good night, David," they said together, and walked off down the corridor.

David watched them leave, then said, "Well, until the next meeting of the 'Alexandra Committee'..." He turned to go.

"Thanks, David," Alexandra said.

"No need to hug me or kiss me," he said.

She snorted.

"And please don't get me in any more trouble with C and F."

"I think you got yourself in trouble."

He rolled his eyes and walked away with a dismissive wave.

Alexandra and Anna continued slowly toward Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall.

"Who do you need to talk to?" Anna asked.

"Mr. Journey," Alexandra said, after a long pause. "Want to come along?"

After a slightly shorter pause, Anna nodded.

The basement of Charmbridge Academy was arranged in a roughly circular fashion beneath the septagonal layout of the upper floors, but since it was underground, it had many side corridors and rooms outside the loop. This meant that it was very easy to get lost, especially since most of it was perpetually dark.

There were many stairwells that led down to the basement. Alexandra and Anna descended through one of the smaller ones. Anna shivered a little, but her voice was firm when she asked, "Aren't we risking getting in trouble if we're caught? Last year even the main basement was off-limits to students."

"We're not going to do anything," Alexandra said, "and we're not going anywhere off-limits, like the sub-basements."

Anna shuddered more at that. The secret subterranean levels beneath the main basement were supposedly sealed off permanently now, but they had supposedly been sealed off last year, and Alexandra and Darla had still managed to get down there.

"Also," Alexandra said, "we're going to meet a member of the staff."

"I'm not sure he's exactly a member of the staff... anymore," Anna said.

As Alexandra cast a Light Spell, she noticed Anna's unease. "You don't have to come if you don't want to. I'll be fine."

"So will I." The light of Alexandra's wand gleamed in Anna's eyes, before she said "Lumos" and lit her own. "I'm not afraid of him."

Alexandra smiled, and they walked into the dark basement. Most of the rooms down here were used for storage; many had no signs on the doors and most Alexandra had never even peeked into. Lamps always illuminated the largest basement corridor found at the base of the stairwell near the main entrance, where the custodian's office was located, but Alexandra and Anna had descended into an unlit area and could only see to the end of the stone corridor, the limit of the circle of light cast by their wands.

"Mr. Journey?" Alexandra whispered. She and Anna walked toward one end of the corridor, where there was a small door that said 'Lift 3.'

"I wonder what 'Lift 3' means." Alexandra reached for the door.

"Alex!" Anna squealed.

Alexandra heard a pop behind them; she turned around as Anna jumped.

A house-elf stood there in the corridor, large eyes squinting at them from waist height.

"Misses should not be here," the elf said. "Both misses knows better."

"Hi, Em," Alexandra said. "I'm looking for Mr. Journey. Is he down here?"

"Mr. Journey is always down here. Like elveses, he is not allowed to go anywhere else."

"Elves aren't allowed to leave the basement?" Anna asked.

"Not when students is here, unless we is performing duties. We keeps out of sight." Em turned back to Alexandra. "Mr. Journey usually haunts near his office, unless he and Miz Fletcher is quarreling. Why is misses looking for Mr. Journey here in the dark?"

"Don't ghosts usually hang out in the dark?"

Em gave her an odd look. "Follow Em and we will find Mr. Journey."

Alexandra and Anna followed the elderly house-elf. She led them around a bend into the main basement corridor that Alexandra had been avoiding precisely because she might run into Ms. Fletcher.

"I, um, I don't want to talk to Ms. Fletcher," Alexandra said.

"Em guessed that," Em said. "Ms. Fletcher is not down here right now."

There was a glow near the custodian's office that wasn't caused by the lamps on the wall. Alexandra glanced at Anna.

"I'm not afraid of him," Anna said.

Benedict Journey, Charmbridge Academy's former custodian and groundskeeper and one-time member of the Thorn Circle, floated in the middle of the corridor, arms folded over his chest to hide the bloody wound that was responsible for his demise. The ghost's eyes were no longer twinkling blue, but the Radicalist warlock's smile was still much as it had been in life.

"Hello, Starshine," he said.

"Stop calling me that," Alexandra said.

He sighed. "I used to call all the girls Starshine."

"You used to be alive," Alexandra said.

Journey's smile faded at her harsh tone. "I suppose you're here about what happened this afternoon at the Invisible Bridge? Lilith told me all about it. She already put the rack and thumbscrews to me."

"She did that?" Alexandra said, shocked in spite of herself. Anna put a hand over her mouth.

"Not literally," the ghost said. "But she can be as bad as her sister."

"I'll bet." Alexandra hid her relief. "It is kind of coincidental, someone trying to kill me on the Invisible Bridge, just like you did, using the same spell you used against Ms. Grimm..."

The ghost cut her off. "Alexandra, do you really believe I'm responsible? Do you think I'd still be here if Lilith thought I was responsible?"

Alexandra realized she had tipped her wand forward, pointing it at the ghost. Mr. Journey gave no sign that he'd noticed, but Em, watching the scene anxiously, had fixed her eyes on the glowing end of the wand. Alexandra lowered it.

"But the murder of crows," she said, "just like the one you summoned..."

"I didn't invent that spell, Alexandra. I learned it while I was on the run. It's well known among the Dark Convention."

"You were a member of the Dark Convention?"

Journey slowly turned toward the very quiet house-elf. "Em, darlin'," he said, "would you mind leaving us?"

The elf looked from the ghost to the girls uncertainly. "Misses should not be down here without supervision."

Alexandra said, "We're fine, Em. Dean Grimm wouldn't have left Mr. Journey down here if she didn't think he was trustworthy, right?"

"Very well," Em said. "But Misses goes straight back upstairs when they is done talking to Mr. Journey?" She tried to sound firm, but her voice came out as more of a plea as she pointed a finger in the direction of the stairs.

"I promise," Alexandra said.

Relieved, the elf disappeared with a pop.

Alexandra waited for Mr. Journey to say what he hadn't wanted to in front of Em. He was no longer their head custodian, but for years, Charmbridge's elves had obeyed him and been loyal to him. She wondered if they'd felt betrayed by him, too.

"I was as much a member of the Dark Convention as anyone can be," Mr. Journey said. "But I wasn't part of the circles your father was dealing with. The Dark Convention is a movement, a counter-culture, as much as it is a secret society. In every Territory you'll find warlocks who claim to be part of the Dark Convention. Most of them are crackpots."

"What were you?"

"Someone on the run. Scared of your father, scared of the Auror Authority, scared of the Office of Special Inquisitions." Journey shrugged. "You know most of this story already, Star— Alexandra. You know why I tried to kill you." Guilt flickered in his eyes. "I thought you forgave me."

"I did. But I still have questions."

"I don't know who tried to kill you this time, Alexandra. I really don't. I was nowhere near the Invisible Bridge. I'm not allowed to greet new students anymore. I'm barely even allowed out of the basement." The ghost's tone was mournful. "I told Lilith I'd keep an eye out for any unusual activity and tell her if I hear anything. Not that I'm likely to, down here in the basement."

"Lots of things happen down here in the basements." Alexandra paused a moment. "Why would the Dark Convention want me dead?"

"I told you, the Dark Convention isn't really that organized."

"But they do gather sometimes. They allied with my father. And they want me dead."

"How do you know that, Alexandra?"

"I don't," she said. "But I think I'm right."

"Well, I couldn't tell you if you are or not. I broke any ties to them when I came here."

"You don't hear rumors, you don't have any contacts?"

Journey laughed bitterly. "Who talks to a ghost?"

"Other ghosts?"

He shook his head. "Not here. I wish I could be more helpful, Alexandra, I really do. You know I'd like to make up for..." He paused. "It was why I went with you last year, to..." His voice trailed off again.

Alexandra wondered how much to believe him. She couldn't think of a reason for him to lie, except that he was always reluctant to admit his guilt.

Anna had not spoken a word, but she was paler than Alexandra had ever seen her.

"We should probably go," Alexandra said.

"I'll be watching for any suspicious behavior," Journey said. "Trust me, there won't be any more fooling around down here in the basements. And I can't say Boudica and I are becoming fast friends, but she's a darn sight sharper than Ms. Gale was."

"That's good, I guess." Alexandra paused. "You know, there's someone else you've never asked for forgiveness. Since being unforgiven is the reason you're still haunting Charmbridge, right?"

"That's not precisely true," Journey said, "but you're right about asking forgiveness."

Anna tensed.

"Anna," Journey said, "I am very sorry about what I did, to you and to Alexandra. It was terrible and I hated doing it. I never wanted to hurt either of you."

"But you did." Anna looked at Alexandra, but Alexandra said nothing. Whatever Anna decided was up to her.

Anna turned back to the ghost. "Alexandra told me how she forgave you. I think that was really brave of her, and better than you deserve."

"Yes," he said quietly.

"I'm not as brave as her." Anna took a deep breath. "I still have nightmares about being tied to a tree, you know. And I hate the fact that after everything you did, you're down here in the basements, haunting the place where I live."

"I'm sorry," Journey said.

"I hope you are," Anna said. "Maybe someday I'll be able to forgive you, too. But I can't yet."

Journey's glow dimmed. The air became cold again.

Alexandra said, "C'mon, Anna. Let's go."

They left the ghost floating in the corridor in front of what had once been his office. As they made their way upstairs, Alexandra said, "You are too as brave as me."

Anna smiled without conviction.

"You never told me you had nightmares," Alexandra said.

"I guess sometimes I don't tell my friends everything either." Anna caught Alexandra's arm, then continued walking while holding onto it. "Should I have forgiven him?"

"Only if you want to. You don't owe him anything."

Anna let out a long breath. "When we both stop having nightmares. Then, maybe."

By Monday morning, Anna had stopped looking quite so ill. She had not taken the truth about her father very well. Alexandra worried what would happen when Anna returned home to face Mr. Chu.

Around the table at breakfast, the ninth graders compared their schedules.

"Confederation Citizenship, Advanced Magical Theory I, and Charms III," Alexandra said. "Then after lunch, Transfiguration III, Herbology, and Practical Magical Exercise."

"Herbology?" David said. "Why would you pick Herbology as your Alchemy elective?"

"Because my grades weren't high enough for Advanced Alchemy, and Potions would mean being in Mr. Grue's class again."

"We hain't sorry not to be in Mr. Grue's class no more," Forbearance said.

"We learn potions an' herbs at home," Constance said.

"I guess the rest of us are in Advanced Alchemy," Anna said.

David grimaced. "I'm taking Potions. Mr. Grue's a jerk, but I heard you learn some really cool potions in his advanced class."

Confederation Citizenship was a required class for all ninth graders – the last required course in their Wizarding Social Studies track – so they were all in that class together. The teacher, Mrs. Middle, was a cheerful, well-intentioned witch whom Alexandra had come to dislike. This wasn't entirely fair, because Mrs. Middle was not mean or even a particularly bad teacher, but her patronizing attitude had annoyed Alexandra as a sixth grader, and knowing what she did now about the Confederation, she didn't want to hear more of Mrs. Middle's opinions about Muggles and Cultures.

"Begin thinking now about your Citizenship Projects," Mrs. Middle told them. "It's a Territory-wide requirement for all students to do something in service to the Confederation during your freshman year. Don't wait until the very end of the semester to give me your plan."

Service to the Confederation, Alexandra thought angrily. How about ending the Deathly Regiment? That would be a great service to the Confederation. Though they probably wouldn't see it that way.

In Mr. Adams's Magical Theory class, however, Alexandra actually took notes.

"What, are you turning into a wyrm?" David asked after the class ended. He and Alexandra were walking down the hallway toward their third-period Charms class.

"The only way I can move from this class to Advanced Magical Theory II is to ace it and get a Superior SPAWN score in Magical Theory."

"Since when do you care so much about grades and SPAWNs?"

"Since I found out I have seven years to live," Alexandra muttered.

David's smirk faded.

"I'm going to need every bit of magic I can learn," Alexandra said, in a more normal tone of voice. "In class and out." Her father, she was sure, had not been taking regular ninth grade Magical Theory classes at age fourteen.

He nodded. "I'll study hard, too."

She laughed. "Study for yourself!"

Her laughter died as they entered Mr. Newton's class. The room was quiet and Mr. Newton, the humorless Charms teacher, was already conjuring formulas on the board, so everyone's attention turned to Alexandra and David immediately. Abashed, they moved apart, Alexandra to sit next to Anna and David to sit with Dylan.

Following Mr. Newton's class was lunch, and then Transfiguration with Mr. Hobbes. Students walking into his classroom stumbled to a halt, then moved more slowly to their desks. Mr. Hobbes's room appeared to have been transformed into a pet store: there were rodents, snakes, birds, and turtles in cages, and even goldfish bowls sitting on shelves all around the periphery.

The teacher stood behind his desk, on which sat a fluffy, snow white cat. With his frizzy white hair and oversized glasses, Mr. Hobbes's grin made him look a bit manic. He seemed to be enjoying the

students' reactions, and the only other sound as he called roll was the rustling, squeaking, and chirping of the animals.

After he marked the last name on his list, he said, "This year you will perform animate transformations. You've practiced animating inanimate objects before, but until now, you've had very little practice transforming living creatures."

He waved his wand, and with pops, poofs, and whooshes of air all around the room, the mice and snakes and birds and turtles became cups, erasers, pincushions, marbles, and floating bits of wood.

"Your first task this semester will be to restore these creatures to their natural shapes," he said. "By the time of your midterm, I expect flawless transformations."

Everyone looked around at the cages and tanks full of inanimate objects.

Anna raised her hand slowly.

"Miss Chu?" asked the teacher.

"Isn't this kind of... cruel?" Anna asked.

"I don't want to transform turtles and rats and other live animals," said Lydia Ragland.

Mr. Hobbes frowned. "Miss Chu, what is your wand made of?"

"Willow, with a dragon heartstring core," Anna said. There was a touch of pride in her voice: Alexandra knew that Chinese wizards prized dragon heartstring wands above all others.

"How do you suppose that heartstring was obtained?" Mr. Hobbes asked.

Anna looked at the dark wood wand resting beneath her hand on her desk, and didn't raise her eyes again.

"Every year some students want to get out of animate transfigurations by telling me that transforming animals offends their sensibilities," the teacher said. "I understand there are even some

vegan students at Charmbridge now. Well, there's no such thing as a vegan wand, now is there?"

Forbearance opened her mouth. Under their table, Alexandra saw Constance's heel connect with her sister's ankle.

"If you're so concerned about the animals," Mr. Hobbes said, "then you'll study hard so as not to make any mistakes. I assure you, properly done, there's no need for the poor creatures to suffer from a mistransfiguration." He picked up the cat on his desk and held it out at arm's length.

"This is Fafnir," he said. "He used to be a dragon."

Everyone stared at the cat. From the expressions of the students, most shared Alexandra's skepticism.

The cat opened its mouth and produced a high-pitched, metallic, tea-kettle roar. Wisps of smoke curled around its whiskers. In the stunned silence, the teacher set the cat back down on the desk. It began grooming itself.

"Perhaps someday I'll tell you how he was transformed," Mr. Hobbes said.

Anna looked ill again after they left class. "You know I'm terrible at transfigurations," she said. "It's always been my worst subject!"

"Don't worry, we'll get you through it," Alexandra said. "Have fun in your Advanced Magical Theory class – I've got Herbology next."

"Oh, Herbology!" said Sonja from behind. "I've got that, too. I'll come with you."

"Great," Alexandra said, with a lack of enthusiasm that Sonja didn't seem to notice as they separated from the others.

Herbology was usually taught in a classroom on the first floor, but Mrs. Verde, a plump, weathered woman in traditional witch's garb, told them they would be spending most of the first couple of months outside, while it was still warm enough to grow and gather herbs.

While they all copied a list of the tools each student was to bring to every class, Sonja confided in Alexandra: "I signed up for Herbology because it's supposed to be an easy 'A.' I didn't think we'd be kneeling in the dirt."

"Where did you think herbs come from?" Alexandra asked.

"Little jars you buy from apothecaries."

Before leaving the classroom, Alexandra asked Mrs. Verde about something she had noticed: "Why aren't there any boys in this class?"

The teacher chuckled. "Boys usually aren't interested in Herbology. They want to bottle glory or discover the Philosopher's Stone. And they think herb magic is for girls."

Alexandra thought she wouldn't mind being able to bottle glory. Reading her expression, Mrs. Verde said, "Have a little patience, Miss Quick. Potions have their uses, but there is more to get out of my class than an easy 'A.'"

Practical Magical Exercise was the last class of the day. For younger students it was mandatory and gave them an opportunity to perform magic outside a classroom setting. In P.M.E. and in weekly seminars with a rotating band of teachers, Charmbridge students were taught basic magical defense, broom skills, and how to care for familiars, but older students usually only took the class if they were on a sports team, or if they were members of the Junior Regimental Officer Corps.

Alexandra changed into her uniform before going outside to join her fellow mages. This was her third year in the JROC. As a seventh grader, she'd been 'drafted' into the student militia as punishment. She had stayed in it because of her brother. She wasn't sure why she'd signed up again this year, when there were other classes she could take like Astronomy and Astrology or Arithmancy or Magizoology.

Several JROC members had quit last year because of Alexandra's presence. She was sure there would soon be demands for her removal again. Jordan Klein and Theo Panos, two boys who had made no secret of their disdain for her, muttered darkly. But juniors

Ermanno DiSilvio and Charlotte Barker welcomed her back, and Charlotte asked if she was okay. Alexandra's scratches were mostly healed, but she still had a bandage over one ear, making her look rather more martial.

A group of sixth graders fidgeted nervously in their not-yet-fitted uniforms as they waited, under the watchful eye of Mage-Private William Killmond.

"Looking forward to piling on the new wands?" Alexandra asked William from behind.

He jumped and turned to face her, then came stiffly to attention. "No, ma'am! I mean, I just hope I can help them... you know, fit in, Witch-Private Quick, ma'am."

"William," she said, indicating the stripe on his sleeve, "you're the same rank as me."

He looked down at his sleeve, bemused. "Oh... you're right, ma – I mean, Alexandra." He blushed. "But I'm sure you'll be promoted soon."

"Maybe." She shrugged. If Ms. Shirtliffe isn't still annoyed at me.

Ms. Shirtliffe's voice rang out: "Mage-Sergeant Major, do you plan to let these wands stand around like gabbling jarveys all afternoon?"

"Fall in!" cried Mage-Sergeant Major Daniel Keedle, and everyone formed up.

Witch-Colonel Shirtliffe strode to the front of their formation in her blue-gray Regimental Officer Corps uniform and gleaming black boots. Her scarred face and gunmetal gray hair made her a much scarier figure to the sixth graders than when they saw her in class in regular teacher's clothing.

"Let's see how bad your drills and courtesies are after a summer spent lazing around at home," Colonel Shirtliffe said. "Mage-Sergeant Major, I want marching, then for the returnees, broom drills. Witch-Corporal Chandra, you will help instruct the new wands. Mage-Private Killmond, you'll assist."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Supriya Chandra, echoed an instant later by a startled William.

Alexandra felt slightly disappointed that Ms. Shirtliffe hadn't chosen her. She had never liked drills, but she was good at them.

After two years of practice, the uniform no longer bothered her. She would never love it as her brother had, but something about the Junior Regimental Officer Corps kept bringing her back. She didn't even think it was the memory of Maximilian – entirely.

Most of the JROC students were half-bloods, like her and Mage-Sergeant Major Keedle, or Muggle-borns, like William. It had been mostly purebloods, like Adela Iturbide, who'd quit last year. Theo Panos and Jordan Klein notwithstanding, everyone remaining in the JROC seemed to accept Alexandra as one of them.

Anna was thrilled when Alexandra suggested nightly study sessions in the library. The second evening they met there, Constance and Forbearance joined them, carrying impressively thick books with intimidating titles like *A Defense of Theurgic Principles* and *Ptolemaic Wizarding Ontology*.

"Wow," Alexandra said. "This is what you read for Advanced Magical Theory II?"

"Nope," the Ozarker girls said together.

David strolled up to their table. "Hey, 'sup? Sorry I'm late – had to change after practice with Cecil and them."

"Late for what?" Alexandra asked.

"You was practicin' for Quidditch tryouts?" Constance asked.

"Yeah. I hope I make the team as a regular this year. I've been practicing all summer."

"You were practicing over the summer? On a broom?" Alexandra sat straight up. "Don't you know how much trouble you'd be in if you got caught?"

"My dad's team has a big indoor training facility. He let me in when it was empty – had to do it real early or real late, though."

Alexandra tried to hide her envy. "What are you doing here?"

David sat down next to Constance. "What do you think?" He gestured at Alexandra, making a simulated wand motion with his hand. "Go on, do that Muffliato thing."

Everyone waited expectantly.

"This is the second official meeting of the Alexandra Committee," Anna said.

"Okay, you have to stop calling it that," Alexandra said.

"You started it."

"Muffliato," Alexandra said, filling the area with a soft buzzing. She put away her wand. "I didn't think you guys were serious."

"What?" Constance gave her a reproving look. "Was everything you told us serious?"

"Well, yes, but –"

"We have to decide what to research," Anna said, unrolling a parchment. She considered it. "Actually, it might be a bad idea to write stuff down."

"Gonna be hard to research without writing anything down," David said.

"Alex, is there a spell like Muffliato for writin'?" Forbearance asked.

"If there is, I don't know it."

"Yes you do!" Excited, Anna wrote 'The Deathly Regiment' on the parchment with her quill.

"Anna!" Alexandra looked around quickly, but no one else was near their table.

Anna took out her wand. "We all learned the Editing Ink Charm in sixth grade." She cast the spell, and the words she'd written transformed into 'The Alexandra Committee.'

"Hah, hah," Alexandra said. "But once you edit something, what you wrote before is gone..." Her voice trailed off.

Anna smiled at her. "You remember it, don't you?"

Alexandra nodded. She held her wand over the parchment. "Yumo shui niuzhan."

The ink squirmed and wriggled across the parchment, and reverted to what Anna had originally written. Before anyone could read it, Alexandra muttered and pressed the tip of her wand into the words 'Deathly Regiment.' Wisps of smoke curled around her wand as the parchment blackened.

"Very dramatic," David said. "But what was that Chinese?"

"An Unediting Spell," Alexandra said.

He grinned. "Cool – two new spells."

"I hope you're better at pronouncing Chinese than Alex is," Anna said.

"That be our first task, then," Constance said. "Alex, dear, you need to teach us Muffliato. Then Anna can teach us Woomoshenoozen."

Anna winced.

For the rest of the week, they met in the library each evening. Since there wasn't much homework in the first week of class, they were able to spend most of the time practicing.

Muffliato was not a particularly difficult spell; Maximilian had taught it to Alexandra in a couple of days. Anna was the first to cast it successfully, followed by Forbearance, who did her best to hide her satisfaction at learning the spell before Constance did. By Thursday evening, only David had not yet mastered it.

"I guess the Unediting Ink Spell will wait until next week," Alexandra said, twirling her wand and looking around. Since there wasn't much homework in the first week, the library was still sparsely occupied.

"We should talk about what to study, though," Anna said.

"You all realize we're not going to find some spell that fixes everything, right?" Alexandra said. "We're talking about stopping the Deathly Regiment. If Anna's father and his friends in the Wizards' Congress can't do that – if my father can't do it –"

"We'uns hain't just talkin' 'bout stoppin' the Deathly Regiment," Constance said.

"Though that's a fine thing for its own sake," Forbearance said.

"Seein' as how it's why we Ozarkers hain't reg'lar citizens, like Miz Middle is allus remindin' us."

"What?" David said.

"Of course," Alexandra said, with dawning comprehension. "Anna... remember when you told me that Chinese wizards in the Confederation assimilated, and Japanese wizards didn't? That's why you're regular citizens and the Majokai aren't. It's how your family joined the Elect."

"Until my father married a Muggle," Anna said quietly.

"Your father told me his great-great-grandfather did something to bring the Chinese wizarding community into the Confederation. Something he was ashamed of."

Anna looked stricken.

"So, Ozarkers stay separate because of the Deathly Regiment?" David said. "They know about it?"

"We hain't never heard of it 'fore Alexandra told us," Constance said.

"An' we're sure our Ma and Pa never hearded of it," Forbearance said, "or our family'd be –" Constance gave her a sharp look, and Forbearance closed her mouth.

"But it stands right," Constance said, picking up where her sister had left off. "A long time ago, all our kinfolk retired to the hills and forswore associatin' with outsiders, wizards an' Muggles alike. We'uns was always told it's 'cause of furriners' wicked ways."

"Well, they were right about some foreigners," David said.

"So someone knew about the Deathly Regiment," Alexandra said. "Maybe they were given a choice –"

"Become part of the Elect, get all the rights and privileges, and your children are eligible for sacrifice," Anna said with disgust. "At least your ancestors said no."

"We'uns don't know that's how it was," Constance said, laying a hand on Anna's.

"But it would explain a lot," Alexandra said.

Silence fell around the table. Then Constance said, "It's terrible, what we learned."

"Even knowin' what our elders say 'bout the Confederation, we can't hardly believe anyone could be so evil," Forbearance said.

"But we'uns can't fix it ourselves," Constance said.

"Then what's the point?" Alexandra asked.

Constance cocked her head. "The point is savin' your life."

"We're not letting you go to the Lands Beyond," Anna said.

"Damn straight," David said. When the Pritchards blushed, he said, "Um, I mean, right."

Alexandra smiled at her friends and spoke in a soft voice: "It isn't up to you."

"So you're just giving up?" Anna asked.

"No, of course not." Alexandra felt their concern and their love, and it was almost unbearable. "But it's not just a Geas you have to break. I mean..." She looked away. "I gave my word. On my honor as a witch."

In the appalled silence, David was the first to speak. "Alex, keeping your word is one thing, but I don't think anyone's gonna think less of you if you break a promise to a bunch of twisted elves who tricked you in the first place."

Alexandra didn't answer immediately. She did feel an obligation to keep her word, but when it came down to it, she wasn't sure if she could really walk through the Veil just because she'd made a promise. But she felt it was more than that.

"I don't think things like this are ever that simple," she said. "I didn't just promise – they made me swear with blood. But let's say there is no magical Geas on me, and I could just walk away. You think the Generous Ones won't come looking for me? Or –"

"Someone else," Anna murmured.

"Huh?" David said.

Anna didn't look at Alexandra. "They didn't actually say it had to be you, did they? They just said 'a life for a life.'"

Everyone became very quiet. Then Alexandra said, "No. Forget it. Don't even think it. That's not something we think about or talk about, ever. Understand?"

Anna stammered. "I... I didn't mean we should..."

"Fine. End of subject." Alexandra looked around. No one could meet her gaze.

She took a deep breath. "Anyway, we're getting ahead of ourselves – David still can't even cast Muffliato." She ignored David's sour look.

"We're going to need access to more books," Anna said.

"Trust me, I've learned that getting the books you want can be a challenge around here," Alexandra said.

"You manage to, with a little help from your friends," Anna said.

"My friends –?" Alexandra sat back. "Oh. You mean Bran and Poe."

"Who's Bran and Poe?" David asked.

"The library elves. They're Alexandra's friends," Anna said.

"We have library elves?" David looked around as if expecting to see them lurking on the shelves.

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "How many years have you been in ASPEW – have you ever actually talked to the elves around here?"

David looked properly embarrassed. He'd been a zealous champion of the American Society for the Preservation of Elfish Welfare since sixth grade. The Charmbridge Academy chapter of ASPEW had been lobbying the Dean every year to abolish house-elf servitude and replace elves completely with Clockworks.

Alexandra knew that Bran and Poe would be miserable anywhere but the Charmbridge library. She had visited the two of them the weekend she'd arrived, but after taking advantage of their friendship in previous years to gain access to books in the Restricted Reserves, she was loathe to do so again, and she said so. "I don't want to use them like that."

"They'd want to help if they knew the situation," Anna said.

"Maybe, but it's not like I can tell them."

"Why not?"

Alexandra stared at Anna. "Tell them about what happened?"

"If they're really your friends, they'll want to help."

"They're elves, Anna," said Constance. "We Ozarkers don't have no truck with elves, 'cause we allus thought they's powerful and

oughtn't be trifled with an' keepin' 'em in bondage is wicked an' also plumb foolish."

"Really?" David had become very interested. "You never told me that."

"You hain't never asked what I think, have you?" Constance said.

"They're Charmbridge elves," Alexandra said. "That means even if they're my friends, they have to obey Mrs. Minder and Dean Grimm."

"That means they'uns could be made to tell 'em anythin' they knows," Forbearance said.

Anna swallowed, and said, "Maybe you should tell Dean Grimm."

Everyone turned to Anna in astonishment.

"Tell Ms. Grimm," Alexandra repeated, as if she wasn't sure she'd heard correctly.

"Alex, think: despite all the times you thought she was out to get you, she really wasn't," Anna said. "Maybe if she knew the whole truth –"

"You've got to be kidding."

"She is one o' the powerfulest witches around," Constance said.

"They knows her name even in the Ozarks," Forbearance said.

"Are you forgetting that her sister is an agent of the Wizard Justice Department?"

"She and her sister don't seem to get along," Anna pointed out.

"No way," Alexandra said, "I am not telling Dean Grimm. And I'm not telling Bran and Poe, either. Heck, why don't I just tell the whole school?"

Anna looked down. "Okay, it was a stupid idea."

"No, it wasn't a stupid idea. But I'm afraid I've told too many people already."

"You only told us," Constance said.

"Yes. And I trust all of you. But now all of you have to keep the secret."

"So what are we supposed to study?" David looked dubiously at the Pritchards' thick tomes.

"Muffliato," Alexandra said.

"Oh, great," David said, but now he was looking across the library. "I didn't even know they could read."

Constance and Forbearance said, "Oh, dear."

Benjamin and Mordecai were coming through the stacks.

"We'un'll quiet 'em," Forbearance said, as the twins rose.

"Don't you jump up, David," Constance said.

"We gots to go," Forbearance said. And the two girls hurried away from the table to meet the Rashes. Everyone heard angry whispers and saw the Pritchards bow their heads.

"I don't get it," David said. "Why do they put up with them?"

"Because their parents said they have to," Alexandra said.

"They're not even supposed to socialize with us at all," Anna said. "They've been defying the Rashes for a year now, which means they've been defying their parents."

They watched the Ozarkers leave the library together. Benjamin Rash cast one last glance over his shoulder and fixed Alexandra with an angry scowl, while he placed his hand on the small of Constance's back as they went out the double doors.

Into the Woods

By the end of the first week of classes, a sense of normalcy had been restored to Charmbridge Academy. Alexandra had not forgotten about the crow attack, but she couldn't always be thinking about unseen foes, and her classmates couldn't always be worrying about what would happen around her next. Fellow students began to stop acting as if Alexandra's mere presence was dangerous.

In addition to her regular classes, she had to get up early three days a week for JROC exercises; every other morning they met outside to run around the academy building or do calisthenics in the athletic fields.

On Friday morning, in the dim gray mist hanging over the school with the sun just above the horizon, the JROC did sprints across the lawn. Older officers yelled at the junior ones. Inhuman shapes materialized out of the mist – conjurations to frighten the new wands. Already, two sixth graders had quit: the JROC's attrition rate was high.

As the sweating students were dismissed to return to their rooms and shower before class, Ms. Shirtliffe reminded them that the first meeting of the Dueling Club was that afternoon after PME.

When Alexandra checked the ninth graders' bulletin board before breakfast, there was a notice at the bottom she was all too familiar with:

Alexandra Quick: Report to the main office before the end of the day.

Her friends were standing next to her, and the words came out of her mouth automatically: "I didn't do anything!"

"We'uns din't say nothin'," said Constance.

"It doesn't say 'Dean's office' or 'immediately'," Anna pointed out. "Maybe that means you're not in trouble."

"Maybe. But I'd rather find out immediately what it is this time. See you in the cafeteria." Alexandra turned up the central hallway and presented herself to Miss Marmsley at the main office.

Miss Marmsley was a life-sized portrait who'd been hanging on the wall in the Charmbridge administrative wing since her death in 1932. The living portrait continued to function as school secretary. She looked down her painted nose at Alexandra, who was wearing her JROC uniform as she always did on drill days, and instead of saying "Dean's office," she told Alexandra that there was a letter waiting for her.

"A letter?" Alexandra repeated.

"On the counter." Miss Marmsley gestured.

Alexandra found an envelope on the counter, addressed to her c/o Charmbridge Academy and stamped with owl postage. It was from Payton, and it had been opened.

"Who opened a letter to me, and why didn't the owl deliver it to my room?" Alexandra asked.

"The Dean has instructed that all your mail is to be screened, Miss Quick," the school secretary said.

"Why?" Alexandra asked indignantly.

Miss Marmsley gave her another disapproving look. "Because we've already received two cursed packages addressed to you since the start of the school year. It's for your own good and the good of your fellow students. So do not take that tone with me unless you want to speak to the Dean, young witch."

Alexandra clutched the envelope. People were sending her cursed packages? Who? Why? But she knew – she was Abraham Thorn's daughter. That was enough, apparently. "So Ms. Grimm is going to read all my mail?"

"Certainly not. Mr. Grue is in charge of inspecting suspicious packages."

"Mr. Grue is reading my mail?"

"I doubt he actually reads it," Miss Marmsley said. "He's just making sure you aren't sent any curses, poisons –"

"Oh my God." Alexandra groaned and stomped out of the office.

She arrived at the cafeteria and sat down at the table with Anna and the Pritchards without even collecting her breakfast first. She slapped the letter on the table in front of her.

"Who's that from?" Anna asked.

"Payton," she said.

"Who's Payton?" asked Constance.

"Her boyfriend," Anna said.

Alexandra wasn't really comfortable hearing Anna say it out loud like that, but Constance and Forbearance both perked up immediately.

"Alexandra Quick, you have a beau!" Constance said.

"Ssh!" Alexandra looked around. "Yell it to the whole school, why don't you?"

Constance blushed. "Oh, I'm terrible sorry, Alex, dear. I don't know it's a secret."

"It's not a secret, exactly. I just..."

Forbearance leaned forward with excitement. "We'uns had no inklin'."

"You never mentioned no chub to us," Constance said accusingly.

"He's just – well, for one thing he's in Roanoke Territory." Alexandra stared down at the letter. "But they're reading my mail!"

"Who's reading your mail?" Anna asked.

"Mr. Grue!"

"Mr. Grue is reading your mail?"

Cautiously, Alexandra opened Payton's letter, and her mouth dropped open in horror.

"What is it?" Constance asked, concerned.

"Did he break up with you?" Anna asked.

"No!" Alexandra said. "He sent me... a poem!"

"Oh!" Constance and Forbearance exclaimed, clasping their hands together.

"That's so romantic," Forbearance said.

"You is a lucky gal," Constance said.

"No, I'm not!" Alexandra's face was red. "I'm getting love letters from my boyfriend and Mr. Grue is reading them! Stop looking at me like that! It's not funny!"

She laid her forehead against Payton's letter, while Anna tried to keep a straight face.

"But why would Mr. Grue read your mail?" Constance asked.

"For my own 'protection'," Alexandra mumbled, with her face still pressed against the table. "Apparently, I've gotten two cursed packages already."

Constance gasped. "Someone's sendin' you curses? That's awful!"

Alexandra folded up the letter. "Anna... I'm going to tell Payton and Julia to address their letters to you."

"To me? Why?"

"Because then they'll come to you and you can give them to me, and Mr. Grue won't be reading my personal mail."

"You could just tell Payton not to write you any more poems," Anna said. Her smile faded beneath Alexandra's glare. "They are trying to protect you."

"Payton and Julia aren't going to send me curses."

"Okay, okay," Anna said, acquiescing.

Constance put her chin in her hand and looked off across the cafeteria wistfully. "I still say you is a lucky gal. I sure wish some boy would send me poems."

Following dismissal from JROC that afternoon, everyone but the sixth and seventh graders marched over to the dueling field for the first meeting of the Dueling Club, which was also led by Ms. Shirtliffe.

Larry Albo was there, of course. He had been the Charmbridge dueling champion the previous year, after beating Alexandra in a close final contest.

Alexandra was itching for a rematch.

Larry was standing next to another eleventh grader, a remarkably tall black girl whose name Alexandra didn't remember. She towered over Larry, who wasn't short.

"Albo, Anderson, hands off each other," Ms. Shirtliffe said.

Larry and the black girl stepped away from each other and their hands, which Alexandra now saw had been clasped, fell to their sides. Ms. Shirtliffe scowled at them, then conjured a stack of fliers which she sent swirling through the air in a spiraling trail of paper. Each one flapped its way into the hands of one of the gathered students.

"These are the rules of the Dueling Club, and formal dueling regulations and etiquette," the teacher said. "Of course the official Confederation Junior Dueling rules are much more detailed, and you will all become familiar with them. The Confederation Wizarding Decathlon is being held next year, and the Junior Decathlon tryouts will be next fall. That means anyone who wants to compete to represent Charmbridge Academy at the Central Territory semi-finals has a year to prepare."

Alexandra glanced at the flier. It listed the rules for formal dueling, which precluded many of the spells and dirty tricks her brother had taught her. She already knew every spell on the approved list, though there were variants she had not yet mastered.

"Do not test my tolerance when it comes to safety and abiding by the rules," Ms. Shirliffe said. "I have none. One misstep and you're out of the club. No bullying, no grandstanding. And no settling personal grudges on the dueling field, either." For a moment her eyes flicked to Alexandra, and Alexandra's eyes flicked to Larry. He smirked, though he wasn't looking at her.

Following her speech, Ms. Shirliffe formed students into groups by grade level, then called on some of the more experienced duelers to begin tutoring the eighth graders who'd just joined. Larry and two senior JROC officers were given this task, and then to Alexandra's surprise, Shirliffe said, "Quick – take the red circle."

In the red circle, a duelist blocked attacks without returning them. It was a training exercise, and it was both an honor and a punishment. It meant you were good enough to be target practice for less skilled duelists, but Shirliffe also tended to put students in the circle when she thought they were growing overconfident.

Larry whispered something in the ear of the eighth grader he'd been assigned. The boy looked uncertainly at Larry and then at Alexandra.

Alexandra squared her shoulders, held her wand at the ready, and smiled.

The boy tried his best, but none of his Stunning Charms touched her. The next three did no better; Alexandra blocked everything they threw at her.

The fifth and last eighth grader to take her turn was a diminutive Japanese girl wearing a white blouse and dark skirted trousers.

Tomo Matsuzaka was from a prominent Majokai family in California. Because of tensions between the Japanese and Chinese wizarding communities, Tomo had feuded bitterly with Anna when she'd arrived at Charmbridge two years earlier. Alexandra had forced an end to that feud, but Tomo seemed apprehensive at facing Alexandra. She bowed deeply to the older girl. Alexandra returned the bow.

Whatever fear Tomo might still have had of her didn't stop her from doing her best to get past Alexandra's Blocking Jinxes. For the first

time that afternoon, Alexandra had to concentrate as Tomo threw one hex after another at her.

"Not bad, Matsuzaka," Shirtliffe said. "All right, Quick, Albo, Keedle, Barker – go join the others. I'll take over."

While the teacher gathered the youngest duelers to begin showing them proper stances and wand positions, Alexandra joined the rest of the Dueling Club.

"Can't wait until I get a shot at you, Quick," said Larry, just loudly enough for all of the older students to hear.

"Bring it on," Alexandra said.

They didn't get to do any real dueling that day. Alexandra spent the rest of the afternoon opposite Torvald Krogstad practicing jinxes and counter-jinxes. She kept half an eye on Larry, whose 'Caedarus' spell she'd never been able to block.

When Ms. Shirtliffe called an end to the meeting and sent them inside, Torvald started to speak to Alexandra, but she gave him a quick wave and then ran after the small Japanese girl who was walking into the academy building with the other eighth graders. "Tomo!" she called.

Tomo turned around and blanched. "I'm sorry, Alexandra," she said, bowing. "I didn't know I would have to attack you –"

"Don't be silly, that was just practice. And you were the only one who was any good." Alexandra lowered her voice. "You aren't still afraid of me, are you?"

Tomo shook her head, without looking up.

"I wanted to ask you something," Alexandra said, as they resumed walking.

"Yes?"

"Your father is one of the leaders of the Majokai, right?"

"Yes." Tomo nodded.

"Has he ever talked about why the Majokai have remained a Culture?"

Tomo glanced at her, unable to hide her surprise. "We want to preserve our traditions."

"You could preserve your traditions while being full Confederation citizens, like the Chinese and the Palatines do."

"We made different choices. We still abide by all Confederation laws."

"I know." Alexandra thought a moment. "Some of the Majokai want to become regular Confederation members, don't they? That's why they supported Anna's father last year."

"I don't really know much about politics," Tomo said nervously.

"I was just wondering if you knew anything about who makes decisions like that among the Majokai – being a Culture or allowing your families to join the Elect, I mean."

"My father and the other clan heads would, I guess. But why are you asking?"

"We're talking about Cultures in our Confederation Citizenship class. And, well, Anna's my friend, but I know she's not exactly unbiased about the Majokai."

"Most people are biased against us. Some of the stuff they teach in school..." Tomo cast her eyes quickly downward again, as if fearing that she had spoken inappropriately.

Alexandra said, "We shouldn't believe everything we hear?"

Tomo hesitated, then nodded.

"I already knew that." Alexandra smiled at the younger girl. "See you at the next dueling practice. And when you're paired with me, you'd better not hold back."

She left a silent, blank-faced Tomo behind as she proceeded back to her room.

Larry and Alexandra dueled several times over the next month. Every Friday was open dueling, and they always challenged each other. Ms. Shirtliffe allowed it, though she kept a close eye on them when they faced each other across the dueling platform.

Larry won every time.

It stung, literally and figuratively, but Alexandra was a model of good sportsmanship, bowing and saluting each time she was beaten (except for the time she was knocked out cold with Larry's favorite spell, a green sphere of light that hit like a sack of cement).

Larry was also elaborately polite to her, while the rest of the club looked forward to their fierce contests.

Inwardly, Alexandra seethed, consoled only by the fact that she came a little closer to winning each time. Or so she told herself. If Larry noticed that she was becoming harder to beat, he didn't show it.

They were also bound by formal dueling rules and a limited list of allowable spells. If they ever fought the way Maximilian had taught her – true wizard dueling – it would be a different story, Alexandra thought.

Larry rarely lost to anyone. Only Daniel Keedle was a match for him.

Alexandra usually lost to the seniors as well, but against everyone else in the Dueling Club, she more than held her own. Most of her opponents never wanted to duel her a second time. Torvald was the only exception; he was as persistent as Larry in challenging her. He always showed good humor, but Alexandra was amused that losing to her bruised his ego so badly that he kept seeking a rematch.

She continued to meet her friends in the library, though as their homework increased, they spent more time doing actual schoolwork, and David joined them less regularly. Sometimes he begged off because of Quidditch practice or an ASPEW meeting, but often, he just didn't show up.

Constance was grumbling about this one evening in October as the girls all played Wizardopoly in the ninth graders' lounge, having decided to have a game night instead of studying.

Alexandra said, "It's okay, Constance. He doesn't have to join us every night. None of you do."

"He knows how important what we're doin' is," Constance said.

"Playing Wizardopoly?" Anna said, as she flicked her wand. Her tiny pewter gnome disappeared from one square on the board and reappeared on another.

"We'uns are just takin' a break," Constance said.

"Anyway, this week we've been studying for our Magical Theory midterm, not... other stuff," Anna said.

They all knew the Muffliato spell now, but there were other freshmen in the lounge with them, and a magically impenetrable conversation over a board game might arouse suspicion.

Alexandra grunted, contemplating her tiny pile of gold and the risks of trying to pass the Goblin Banker with it. She had been studying Magical Theory as well – Constance, Forbearance, and Anna were all tutoring her, as she had sworn she would join their more advanced class next semester. She rolled the dice, and groaned when it came up snake-eyes.

"I don't want him hanging around out of guilt or obligation," she said, while the goblin cackled and her gold disappeared.

"I 'magine he don't want to be seen always in the company of girls neither," Forbearance said.

Constance made a disgusted sound.

"Oh, hi!" A new voice interrupted them. Sonja had walked into the rec room, and stood over them, looking down at the board. "You're playing Wizardopoly."

"Yes, we are," Alexandra said.

Sonja remained standing there. Alexandra and Anna exchanged glances with the Pritchards. Alexandra sighed inwardly. "Do you want to join us?"

"Sure." Sonja grinned and pulled up a chair. "I'm just taking a break from studying Astrology."

"You'uns gotta study for Astrology?" Constance said. "What's there to learn?"

Forbearance bit her lip as Sonja looked at Constance in surprise. Alexandra and Anna exchanged glances again.

Constance was taking Muggle Studies again this year, but instead of continuing in that class, Forbearance had chosen Astronomy and Astrology as her elective. It was the first time the twins' schedules were not identical, and Constance did not think highly of Astrology.

"Of course we have to study," Sonja said. "Astrological charts are complicated, and casting someone's chart takes practice. Have you picked your subject yet, Forbearance? I'm doing Carol. Oh, of course you're going to do Constance's chart. That would be so dark, having a twin – all the major aspects and paths are the same as yours."

"Constance don't wish to be charted," Forbearance said.

"Oh." After an uncomfortable pause with no explanation forthcoming, Sonja said, "Then how about Alexandra?"

"No thanks," Alexandra said. She didn't want to hurt Forbearance's feelings, but she was skeptical about Astrology also.

"I'll bet your chart is really interesting," Sonja said. "Don't you think charting Alexandra would be fun, Forbearance? I'll help you."

"No thanks," Alexandra said, more firmly.

"Maybe we'uns should cast your chart, Alexandra," Forbearance said. "We might learn somethin' important."

Alexandra made an effort to appear patient. "I doubt we'll learn anything we don't already know."

Forbearance frowned, and Alexandra held up her hands in concession. "Fine, but not tonight, okay?"

"Maybe this weekend?" Sonja said.

"I thought I'm Forbearance's project," Alexandra said, a little annoyed at Sonja's pushiness.

"You're so touchy." Sonja rolled the dice and moved the little copper cat she'd just put on the board.

With Sonja present, conversation about David and other such things vanished. They played until it was almost time for curfew, and then Sonja walked with Alexandra and Anna back to their suite.

"See you tomorrow morning," Sonja said. "I'm so glad I signed up for Herbology – two whole periods excused from our other classes!"

"What?" Anna asked, as she and Alexandra finally closed the door to their room. Anna had been trying not to roll her eyes the entire time Sonja was with them. "Why are you excused from class tomorrow morning?"

"Mrs. Verde is taking us into the woods to look for magical plants," Alexandra said. "All of her Herbology classes, beginning to advanced."

Anna shook her head. "No wonder Sonja likes Herbology so much. Just like Astrology – it's hardly even a real class..." Her voice trailed off. "Um, I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did." Alexandra shoved Anna lightly. "It's okay. You're right, Herbology is an easy 'A.' But it is pretty interesting. Mrs. Verde says some of the poisons you learn to prepare in Herbology II are deadlier than any of Mr. Grue's potions."

Anna made a face. "Why would you want to learn to prepare poisons?"

"You never know when you might want to slip someone Devil's Rue." She grinned at Anna, who remained unamused.

Alexandra had discovered to her surprise that she enjoyed Herbology. From September to October, they had spent little time in the classroom. Instead, Mrs. Verde's students planted a winter herb garden and cared for the school's greenhouse.

The morning of their expedition into the woods was chilly. As they all milled around on the lawn, with a tinge of frost crackling on the grass where they stepped, many students were running back inside to get heavier robes and cloaks. Next to the school, it was just a little misty, but near the woods, the fog was denser.

Miss Gambola, a teacher's aide, rounded up the younger students and enlisted the handful of juniors and seniors in the Advanced Magibotany classes to assist her. Seventh and eighth graders had to stay within sight of one of the teachers at all times, but the high school students could roam more freely.

"You will remain within the bounds of school property," Mrs. Verde said. "Everyone will be perfectly safe, as long as no one ventures too deeply into the woods."

"Bet she tells us about the Hodag now," Alexandra whispered to Sonja.

"We wouldn't anyone going missing thanks to the Hodag," Mrs. Verde said.

Sonja raised her hand.

"Yes, Sonja?" asked the teacher.

"How will we know if we've gone out of bounds?" Sonja asked.

"You'd have to hike quite a long way. Don't wander so far that you can't see or hear anyone else, and you'll be fine. If we have to come looking for you, you can expect to serve detention." The teacher pulled her dark cloak tighter, and led the group of students toward the trees. "Now, who can tell me the best way to catch disappearing toadstools?"

There was a lull in the students' chatter as they approached the tree line. From ahead of them came a deafening din: hundreds of crows nesting in the trees, all cackling and cawing at each other. As the

humans came nearer, the birds made even more noise, angrily protesting the intrusion. The mist was so dense now that none of the birds could be seen, but Alexandra heard them flapping, and dark shapes flitted just within view before disappearing again.

The students nearest Alexandra were edging away from her.

"They're just crows," she said, while she clutched her wand beneath her cloak.

"Well, with that many crows up there, there probably isn't any magic mistletoe," Mrs. Verde said. Magic mistletoe was as parasitical as its non-magical counterpart but less choosy about what it attached itself to; it was just as happy to feed on blood as sap. "So let's walk a little further away east." She led the students to a place out of sight of the athletic fields, where the trees were a little older and the underbrush thicker, and there weren't so many crows lingering about. "Now remember, no one wander off too far by yourself, and anyone who finds a cluster of magic mistletoe is excused from the next quiz."

Sonja reached into her cloak and withdrew a twig with dried leaves and preserved berries. The Herbology teacher had given everyone a small sample to help them identify the plant. Alexandra kept her attention on the ground. Their chances of spotting any mistletoe high in the trees were minimal unless the sun burned away the fog, so she tried sneaking around trees hoping to surprise some disappearing toadstools instead.

For the rest of the morning, she bagged whatever plants she could find. Other than some verbena, the pickings were sparse near the school, as she suspected Mrs. Verde knew they would be, though occasionally some of the younger students shouted excitedly when they found the elusive toadstools. Alexandra gathered some twilight moss off the lee side of a tree, and overturned a few rocks, but discovered only a gnome, who made disgusting grunting noises at her and waddled deeper into the woods.

The mist cleared after half an hour, but even when the treetops became visible, there didn't seem to be any magic mistletoe. Alexandra pushed ahead through the woods, avoiding the other students but not getting too far from them.

She had been studying a promising tangle of leaves and vines fifty feet up in the branches of a twisting old oak when Sonja suddenly came around the tree, startling her.

"That's very mature, jumping out from behind a tree," Alexandra said. "What are you, six?"

"I found something. C'mon." Sonja turned and moved back the way she'd come.

"What?" Alexandra looked back and forth between the cluster of vines up in the treetops and the retreating redhead.

Sonja stopped to check whether Alexandra was following only when she was almost out of sight. She waved and disappeared into some thick bushes growing between two large oaks.

"Sonja!" Alexandra walked after her. When she reached the bushes, Sonja was waiting for her by another tree.

"Follow me," Sonja said. She turned around again and continued deeper into the woods.

"Hey! Wait up!" Sonja was walking so rapidly, Alexandra nearly tripped over roots and undergrowth catching up to her. "Where are you going?"

"I found something," Sonja repeated. "Come on."

There was something wrong with the way Sonja was acting, Alexandra thought. She looked over her shoulder. She could just barely hear the voices of their classmates echoing through the trees. "Sonja, we're going to get in trouble." When she looked ahead again, Sonja was disappearing around another tree. "Hey!" She ran to catch up to the girl again. "Sonja, what's your problem?"

"Are you scared?"

"No, but this is the longest I've ever gone without going to the Dean's office or getting detention. And you haven't told me where the heck we're going."

"I found something."

"You said that. What is it?"

"I'll show you."

They walked another ten yards, and Alexandra could no longer hear anything but birds. She grabbed Sonja's arm. "Sonja, stop!" She jerked the girl around. "I've been lost in the woods before, and it's not cool. Tell me where we're going, or I'm going back."

Sonja blinked at her. "All right, if you're scared." She shook off Alexandra's grip and turned back around. "We're almost there." She resumed walking.

Alexandra stared at Sonja's back. The uneasy feeling was much stronger now. She held up her wand, hesitated, and cast a red flare flashing into the sky. It was a basic charm that every sixth grader was taught, though she had never used it before. Then she ran after Sonja. "Sonja, I mean it. Stop now, or –"

"We're here," Sonja said. She was standing in a patch of mossy undergrowth on the other side of an old, rotten log, a big one that was difficult to step over even half-buried in the ground. Stringy, dark green tufts sprouted out of the soil around her ankles. The small clearing deep in the woods was heavily shaded, and bordered by the rotten log and several large trees, very little sunlight reached it.

"And?" Alexandra asked. "What's here?"

A realization came to her in a flash: Sonja couldn't have found this place while Alexandra was looking for magic mistletoe and disappearing toadstools. It was too far for the other girl to have come all this way and back in the time they'd been separated.

Sonja squatted and grabbed one of the dark green tufts with both hands. She yanked, hard.

The stringy green vegetation was like hair. A bare, wrinkled lump attached to it emerged from the ground. Alexandra pointed her wand at Sonja and said, "Locopetrificus!"

Sonja stopped moving instantly and remained frozen in a squatting position; even her face was immobile, and her eyes were glassy. She was still clenching the plant in both hands.

Alexandra couldn't explain why she'd just done what she had, but shivers were running down her spine. She stared at the bulbous root that Sonja had started to pull from the ground. It was gray and ugly, and the earth around it moved. Something was squirming down there.

Behind her came a pop, followed quickly by another. Ms. Grimm said, "Miss Quick, what are you doing?"

"Stars Above!" Mrs. Verde gasped. "Sonja – Alexandra – get away from there, now!"

Sonja, of course, did not move.

The two witches stepped in front of Alexandra. Mrs. Verde's wand was out, pointing not at Alexandra or at Sonja, but at the ground at Sonja's feet. Her hand was shaking. "Interra," she said, and the gray lump sank back into the earth, drawing its green sprouts with it and pulling Sonja off-balance. The petrified girl toppled forward, but before she hit the ground face-first, Ms. Grimm waved her wand and levitated her into the air.

"You stopped her before she uprooted it," the Dean said.

"Uprooted what?" Alexandra asked.

"Mandrakes, Miss Quick," said Mrs. Verde, standing amidst the plants. "These are adult mandrake plants. You've found a full-grown colony of them."

"Mandrakes." Alexandra shuddered. She hadn't really realized what the plants were, but they had talked about mandrakes in class, and she had seen pictures. "Do they really scream when you pull them out of the ground?"

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Verde's voice quavered. "If Miss Rackham had pulled one free, you'd have both been dead in seconds."

The Challenge

Alexandra sat in the Dean's office. She wasn't sure if she was in trouble or not, but Ms. Grimm had sent her here to wait for her. The Dean's cat, Galen, was nowhere to be seen, but Miss Marmsley was a silent, reproachful presence in the small picture frame on the Dean's desk. Behind the desk, the portraits of former deans were also watching her. Alexandra tried to ignore them.

Ms. Grimm arrived after ten minutes. She closed the door, moved behind her desk, and sat down in her leather chair before fixing her gray eyes on Alexandra.

"Miss Rackham seems to be unharmed, but she has no memory of what happened," she said.

"She was Obliviated?" Alexandra asked.

"No," Ms. Grimm said, "I believe she was placed under an Imperius Curse."

"That's one of the Unforgivables." The thought didn't shock Alexandra as much as it should have. It certainly explained Sonja's behavior.

"Yes." Ms. Grimm steepled her fingers. "Tell me everything you remember, Miss Quick, from the moment you set foot outside. And do not hold anything back."

"I don't have to hold anything back. I know what you're thinking, that I was up to something and it went wrong somehow, but I didn't do anything. I was just gathering herbs for Mrs. Verde's class."

"I doubt very much that you know what I'm thinking, Miss Quick. Spare me your guilty conscience and get on with the narrative."

Alexandra tried to relax. "Yes, ma'am." She told Ms. Grimm everything that had occurred.

When she was done, the Dean said, "You should not have gone so far from the others. And when Miss Rackham insisted on venturing out of sight-"

"You just have to find some way that this was my fault, don't you?" Alexandra didn't mean to lose her temper, but she was more stressed and upset than she realized. "What should I have done, Stunned her? I thought about it. Except then I'd probably be expelled for assaulting her. Or maybe I should have just turned back and let her go on by herself and get killed. *Ma'am.*"

"Control yourself, Miss Quick," the Dean said icily.

With an effort, Alexandra sat back and relaxed her grip on the arms of her chair.

"I do not think she would have tried to uproot a mandrake if you hadn't been present," Ms. Grimm said. "She was obviously ordered to lead you there."

Alexandra's anger faded as she thought about the implications.

"That was quick thinking," Ms. Grimm went on. "You saved her life. And your own, of course."

"How could she have been Imperiused? Was someone just waiting in the woods for her to pass by?"

"Perhaps," Ms. Grimm said. "Though we would have known if there was an intruder in the woods. Since the events of the previous two years, we've extended a number of alarm and warding spells. But the Imperius Curse can also be used to plant instructions in a victim's head that are only to be followed later - though only an unusually skilled Dark Wizard could do that."

"So someone could have cursed Sonja any time to lead me into the woods?"

Ms. Grimm didn't answer.

"Someone really is trying to kill me," Alexandra said.

"Yes."

This validation, which was so different from the last time Alexandra had been convinced someone was trying to kill her, was not comforting. The Dean believed her, but apparently didn't know who it was or how to stop them.

"So what are you going to do?" Alexandra asked.

"We are watching over you, Alexandra. More closely than you imagine."

"I'm not sure I like that, either."

"Miss Quick, you can't have perfect privacy and be perfectly safe. You need to stop complaining about the precautions we take; they are not only for your sake. And since you know the danger is real, take more precautions yourself. I told you last year, you can't go sneaking around, running off-campus, pursuing little quests taking you Powers know where..."

"I *wasn't* doing anything reckless. I would never have gone out of bounds if not for Sonja."

"I trust you will continue to exercise discretion and good judgment, then."

When the Dean said nothing more, Alexandra decided that she was dismissed. She stood up slowly.

"If you suspected someone, would you tell me?" she asked.

Ms. Grimm said, "I would watch that person very, very closely."

"Are you watching Mary Dearborn very closely?"

After a long moment, Ms. Grimm answered, "I am. But if a sixth grader can cast Imperius Curses and conjure a murder of crows, she would be the most remarkably talented witch I've ever known. I'm fairly certain even your father couldn't do that when he was eleven. Stay away from Miss Dearborn, Alexandra."

"Yes, ma'am."

Alexandra left the Dean's office. Third period had ended and lunch had started. She walked into the cafeteria and ignored the hush that fell around her. She heard all the usual whispers, and when a group of sophomores gave her apprehensive looks, she glowered at them so fiercely that they edged out of her way and let her cut in line.

She was sitting alone when her friends entered the cafeteria. Anna walked straight to her; the Pritchards tried to follow, but were

intercepted by Benjamin and Mordecai. Alexandra watched them whispering furiously at each other while Anna sat down next to her.

Anna said, "I heard something happened during Mrs. Verde's class. Why did she take you all out into the woods? Is she crazy?"

"So, what rumors have you heard?" Alexandra's eyes were still on the Ozarkers. Innocence arrived in the cafeteria, saw her sisters arguing with the Rashes, and tried to sneak around them before Benjamin gestured at her and raised his voice.

Anna cleared her throat. "Um, you lured Sonja into a mandrake patch and tried to kill her."

"Just by pulling up a mandrake, or was I going to feed them her blood? Maybe let the crows feast on her, too?"

Anna's face twitched. "I haven't heard anything about blood or crows -"

"So how was I going to kill her without being killed myself? I mean, unless I'm rumored to be immune to mandrakes myself. Or maybe I'm actually part-mandrake -"

"Alex, this isn't funny."

Alexandra finally looked at her worried friend. "No, it isn't. Sonja's all right, and no one got hurt. I'll tell you the rest later. But you should get something to eat."

Anna hesitated, then nodded and rose to get in the lunch line.

The Pritchards got in line with the Rashes. From beneath her bonnet, Constance gave Alexandra an apologetic smile, while Forbearance put her hands on the shoulders of her sulky little sister.

David entered the cafeteria as Anna was sitting down with her lunch. He walked directly to them and said, "Alex, what the heck happened? I've been hearing all these rumors -"

"Sonja, mandrakes, Dark Arts, yeah, whatever." Alexandra spoke loudly enough that other people turned their heads to stare at her. "Let's talk about it later, okay?"

Her voice trailed off and Anna and David turned to follow her gaze. Mary Dearborn had arrived with several other sixth graders. She looked strikingly like her older sister, right down to her fancy, brightly-colored robes.

Mary must have sensed the three teens looking at her. She turned her head, and for a moment, her eyes met Alexandra's. Then other students were moving between them, and Mary got in line. Alexandra thought the sixth grader was casting furtive glances over her shoulder, but she turned her own attention to her meal.

Everyone, including David, met in the library that night. Constance and Forbearance had more trouble getting rid of their younger sister than they did avoiding the Rashes.

"Innocence is givin' out that all the gammon 'bout you is false. She near got in another fight," Constance said.

"If you want, I'll tell her I appreciate her sticking up for me but she should knock it off," Alexandra said.

Forbearance had opened a large book of star charts and spoke as she ran a finger down the line of a compact arc-shaped graph: "Girl hain't gonna stop puttin' up for you, Alexandra. She reckons it's her bounden duty."

David turned in his seat. "What I'd like to know is why you don't stick up for yourselves with the Rashes. Are you gonna have to slink out of here if they show up again?"

They were on the third floor of the library, and well back in the stacks, behind shelves of collected merfolk songs and goblin poetry. Not many students ventured back there. But Constance and Forbearance had been wary and glancing over their shoulders when they arrived.

"Let it be, David," Constance said. "We'uns hain't here to discuss Benjamin and Mordecai."

Alexandra cut David off before he could reply. "Okay, so, any ideas?" Anna had unrolled a scroll and had her quill ready to write down their theories.

"We already know who's at the top of your list," David said.

Even as Anna wrote 'Mary Dearborn,' Alexandra frowned. "Not necessarily. Ms. Grimm is right - how could Mary cast spells like that when she just got her wand? And besides, if she can cast an Imperius Curse, why didn't she just Imperius me to go jump off a cliff?"

Constance and Forbearance looked aghast, but Anna, who had written 'Imperius Curse?' under Mary's name, said, "Even with the Imperius Curse, it's hard to make people kill themselves. Also, it doesn't work as well against someone who's really strong-willed."

"Well, we all know how hard-headed Alex is," David said.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Anyway, Mary isn't at the top of my list."

Anna hesitated. "Are you thinking of John Manuelito? Do you really think he followed you here to Charmbridge?"

"Ms. Grimm says they'd know if a stranger was lurking around here, but he could be hanging out past the edge of whatever wards they've put up."

"So, what, he's camping in the woods just waiting for an opportunity to get you?" David asked.

"I didn't imagine seeing him in the Goblin Market."

"So why didn't he just AK you once you were out of sight of everyone else?"

"Ay-Kay?" Forbearance asked.

"You know, the Killing Curse. Avada -"

"David!" Constance's voice rose. "Don't speak them words!"

"I wasn't going to cast the spell! I don't even know how."

"You shouldn't even say it!"

"Hello?" Alexandra raised her voice and waved her arms to catch their attention. "Can we get back to the list?"

Constance and David fell silent.

Anna cleared her throat. "Someone Imperiused Sonja. Someone is definitely trying to kill Alex."

"The Dark Convention," Alexandra said.

Constance and Forbearance went very still. David took a deep breath. It was the only sound besides the scratching of Anna's quill.

"Okay," David said, "the whole Dark Convention is out to get you? Isn't that just a little bit dramatic?"

"It's not the whole Dark Convention."

Forbearance looked up from her charts. "Wasn't..." She hesitated. "Forgive me, Alex, dear, but they say your father..."

"...is allied with the Dark Convention? Mr. Journey says the Dark Convention is really a bunch of different nutbar groups. Some of them were allied with my father and some weren't."

"Now you're listening to that ghost?" David said.

David's tactlessness was getting on Alexandra's nerves. "You know, David, it would be really helpful if you actually had some ideas instead of just shooting everyone else's down."

"Okay, here's an idea - figure out *why* the Dark Convention wants you dead. I mean, I guess John Manuelito might want to kill you for getting him expelled, and Mary Dearborn's motive is obvious, but let's say the Dark Convention - or some wizards who call themselves the Dark Convention - is trying to kill you. I hate to say it, Alex, but anyone can be got. See it all the time back in Detroit."

"You mean the mean streets of Detroit where you live in that mansion?"

"I watch the news. The point is, if a bunch of warlocks want you dead..." He looked troubled. "I know you're Danger Girl out on the dueling field, but do you really think you could take on a real Dark Wizard?"

Alexandra was spared a reply by William suddenly appearing at the end of the aisle that led to their table. He hurried forward between

the stacks of Beings poetry and songs, jumping away from a row of books that made strangled keening sounds whenever anyone passed near. He almost tripped over his plain blue robe before reaching their table.

"Hi," he said nervously as the five ninth graders stared at him. He addressed Constance and Forbearance. "Um, Innocence said Benjamin and Mordecai Rash are looking for you."

"Innocence said what?" they replied together.

"She's tailing them so she'd know when they went looking for you, and -" A loud croak came from within the folds of his robes. He reached a hand into a pocket and pulled out his pet toad. It croaked again, more loudly.

"That means they just entered the library," he said.

"How...?" Forbearance asked.

"She did something with our familiars," William said. "She can make Misery croak, and then Anthony will, too. So she could signal me. She called it sympathy."

"That's an Ozarker charm," Constance muttered.

"That's pretty clever," Anna said.

Alexandra was dumbfounded. "Wait - Innocence is watching the Rashers and she sent you -"

Constance and Forbearance were both getting up from the table. Forbearance closed her book of charts, saying in dismay, "I was near finished."

"We'uns gots to go," Constance said. "We're sorry, Alex, but we'uns can't be caught conspirin' with you'uns."

"It's okay. Go." She gave a warning look to David, and he closed his mouth.

The Pritchards hurried off. William stood there, fidgeting.

"Thanks, William," Alexandra said. "You can go tell Innocence her sisters are in the clear. I hope."

He nodded. "Um, I'm sorry I interrupted your meeting."

"It wasn't a meeting." She leaned closer to him. "Can you do me a favor?"

He nodded.

"Forget you saw us."

He blinked at her, then nodded quickly. "Yes, ma'am."

"William..."

"I mean, yes, Alexandra."

"Alex. You can call me Alex." She patted him on the shoulder. "Now go."

Face shining, he hurried off.

David trudged after Alexandra and Anna as they left the library, and mumbled a sullen good night before turning down the corridor to the ninth grade boys' dorms.

"He's being kind of a jerk," Anna said.

Alexandra was silent. Anna opened her mouth as if to say more, but closed it as the warlock in the portrait over Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall greeted them. They nodded to the portrait, and said nothing else until they reached their room.

"David's being a jerk, but he's right," Alexandra said. "We do need to know why the Dark Convention wants me dead. And..." She looked out the window at the dark night outside. Was John Manuelito out there in the woods, waiting for another opportunity to kill her? Put like that, it did seem rather implausible. But that wasn't what was really disturbing her. "If they want me dead, why don't they just get me while I'm at home?"

Anna gulped; she obviously hadn't thought of that.

"There aren't any protective wards or alarms around my house in Larkin Mills," Alexandra continued. "They could come after me any time."

Anna was very pale.

"Or they could come after me while I'm visiting Julia in Roanoke." Alexandra looked at the door to the adjoining bathroom. "I should probably see how Sonja's doing. I haven't talked to her since this morning." She walked through the bathroom and knocked on the door, and waited until a voice from the next room told her to enter. She did, while Anna stood behind her in the doorway.

Alexandra dreaded facing Sonja, expecting recriminations, blame, even fear. Instead, Sonja was full of questions, and not nearly as traumatized as she should have been after being used as a puppet in a murder attempt.

It was Carol who practically hid in the corner of their room, watching Alexandra fearfully. Alexandra wished she could say something to reassure her, but she couldn't blame Carol for being afraid. Didn't Sonja realize she should be afraid, too?

"So, who's trying to kill you?" Sonja asked.

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Alexandra said.

"You should be careful. That was pretty scary."

"You don't remember anything at all?"

Sonja shook her head. "I was only a few yards away from you. I was just about to call out to you because I thought I saw some magic mistletoe up in the trees. And then..." Sonja frowned. "I think I remember falling. And then I was floating."

"Floating?"

"Yeah, floating down the hall toward the infirmary. And I saw Ms. Grimm and thought I was in trouble, but she told me to keep still, and then Mrs. Murphy examined me, and they told me about the mandrakes and the Imperius Curse, and the Dean said she'd have to send an owl to my parents. I hope they don't shoot sparks over this."

Alexandra glanced at Carol, whose rat was running up and down her arm. "Sonja, I'm really sorry."

"Well, it's not exactly your fault if someone is trying to kill you. Is it?"

"No, but you could have been killed, too."

"I don't think I'll go on any more hikes in the woods with you." Sonja laughed, a little nervously. "Maybe you should be careful, too, Anna."

When Alexandra and Anna returned to their own room, Anna said, "Don't take what she said seriously."

"She's right."

"Okay, let's all stay away from you because being your friend might be dangerous."

Alexandra refused to respond to that. Something else gnawed at her. "I want to talk to Mr. Journey again."

Anna sucked air through her teeth.

"I want you to stay here," Alexandra said.

"I don't really think he's dangerous," Anna objected.

"Then you shouldn't be worried about me talking to him alone."

"Why don't you want me to come with you?"

"Because I think he might say more to me alone than when you're with me."

Anna frowned. "I don't like it."

"I'll be fine." Alexandra fed Nigel and Charlie, then put her cloak back on. It was always cold in the basement.

"You've got less than an hour until curfew," Anna said.

"I'll be back by lights out. Promise."

Silently disapproving, Anna fed Jingwei some owl treats as Alexandra left their room and hurried downstairs.

There were still students, mostly older kids, walking about in the hallways, but nobody talked to her. She took the stairs down to the basement, and rather than trying to sneak into a dark side passage,

she walked directly down the main corridor toward Ms. Fletcher's office.

She wasn't surprised to find Mr. Journey waiting for her, casting as much light with his own glow as the flickering lamp next to him. "I had a feeling I'd see you again, Starshine."

"Seriously, you keep calling me that just to annoy me, don't you?"

He smiled, but it wasn't his usual cheerful smile. "I heard about what happened today. Alexandra, are you going to come accuse me every time something suspicious happens? I don't know how I can prove to you that I'm not behind any of this."

"If I thought you were behind this, I wouldn't be talking to you. I can't think of any reason why you'd want me dead now. But I don't think you've told me everything."

The ghost sighed. "All right. What do you want to know?"

"Did you know about the Mors Mortis Society before you died?"

"Yes."

Alexandra stiffened in spite of herself. "You knew all along that there were kids practicing Dark Arts under the school?"

"Do you really think they could have kept meeting like that for years, avoiding me and the house-elves, if I hadn't known about them?"

"I wondered about that." Alexandra regarded the dead warlock with pity and anger. "So you were behind them all along."

"No. All I did was look the other way and not tell the Dean about them."

"Why?"

The ghost was silent, but a slight breeze stirred around him and then blew down the corridor, making a sound like a distant moan. Finally, he said, "The years I was a fugitive, after I broke away from your father's circle, I never joined any covens or became dedicated to another cause but... even with the Fidelius Charm hiding my identity as a member of the Thorn Circle, I needed help hiding from the

Wizard Justice Department. There were a few shady warlocks who did me some favors."

"You mean Dark Wizards. You put yourself in debt to the Dark Convention."

"Yes. Then I got a job here at Charmbridge. Thought I was safe as I was likely to be. Lilith doesn't like the WJD poking their noses into her school. I could just tend to the grounds, look out for the elves..."

"Did she know about you?" Alexandra asked.

There was another long pause before Journey answered. "She couldn't *know*, because of the Fidelius Charm. But I think she suspected." He let out a ghostly breath that froze the air around him and made Alexandra shiver. "I certainly didn't know you would be showing up here, at her school, a few years later."

She waited for him to continue.

"Anyway, they - the Dark Convention - they let me know I should just... not interfere with that little Dark Arts club. Look, every school has a few kids messing with that stuff. I was promised it didn't amount to anything serious, wouldn't put other students in danger."

"And you believed them."

"It was true, as far as I know, until you arrived." Journey regarded her sadly. "I suppose someone has always kept an eye on the MMS and recruited the ones who were the most talented."

"So you had nothing to do with any of their activities? You didn't help encourage Darla Dearborn into the Dark Arts? You didn't know that John Manuelito wanted me dead?"

"Darla Dearborn? Merlin, no, I had no idea what that poor girl was up to, not even when you made me lead you into the Lands Beyond. And John Manuelito? I exchanged maybe six words with him the entire time he was at Charmbridge. What makes you think he wanted you dead?"

Alexandra studied the ground, thinking, and to avoid looking at Ben Journey.

"Lilith knows all this already," the ghost said. "I confessed everything to her."

"I figured." Alexandra's anger was already fading. She wanted to blame Mr. Journey for Darla's madness and for allowing the events that had led to Maximilian's death, but he'd just been a spectator - a coward, in hiding even as a ghost, but not the one responsible.

"Your father didn't trust the Dark Convention," Mr. Journey said.

Alexandra snorted. "Of course he didn't."

"What I mean is..." Journey paused. "When he put the Circle of Protection on you, obviously he didn't expect that one of *us* would threaten your life. And the Confederation would want to use you, not kill you. But in those last days before he cast the Circle and the Fidelius Charm and we went our separate ways, something was going on with the other Dark Wizards he'd been dealing with. He never shared everything he knew, even with his closest friends. If I'd stayed around, maybe I would have found out. I didn't really understand how the Circle of Protection worked, but I wasn't the only one who wondered why he was so paranoid about protecting *your* life. Of course you were his brand new baby daughter, but who'd want to kill you? And he had other children. But it was you he was worried about. Said he'd protect you from the stars above if he had to."

Alexandra frowned. Another mystery, something else to ask her father if she ever found him in a mood to answer questions again. None of this was very helpful. But it reminded her of something else.

"You tried to kill me the summer before I started at Charmbridge by putting a kappa in Old Larkin Pond, and redcaps. And all those other murder attempts at school - weren't they kind of, well, clumsy? If you just wanted to kill me, why not use a curse? Or run me over with a car? It couldn't have been that hard to get me in Larkin Mills."

Journey seemed unfazed by the questions. "You were being watched. You know that. And there was the Circle of Protection, which I thought was that damned bracelet. I didn't dare try to kill you directly."

"The Circle." Alexandra considered that. "Now that I've told Ms. Grimm everything I knew, anyone could know about the Circle of Protection, right?"

"It doesn't matter - it was broken when I died. You know all this, Alexandra."

"I know it and you know it, but who else knows it?"

Journey looked puzzled. "Your father, of course, and Lilith."

"She might have told her sister. Then everyone in the WJD would know. But would my father have told his new circle?"

"I don't know. Would you mind telling me why this matters?"

"Suppose someone wants me dead. But they've heard Abraham Thorn put a Circle of Protection around me, something that killed the last person who tried to kill me. Would they know that the protection died with you?"

Mr. Journey got the oddest expression on his face. At last, he said, "It's not a textbook spell. I suppose - you think someone thinks you're still protected?"

"Did you ever tell anyone... you know, after you died?"

"No, who would I have told?"

"You never mentioned it to any of the elves? Or maybe another ghost, like when you're floating around in the afterlife asking each other, 'So, how did *you* die?'"

"No." Journey's eyes glowed faintly, mournfully.

"So let's say someone wants to kill me but they think casting Avada Kedavra at me might backfire. Maybe they try to get someone else to do it instead. Or they lure me into a mandrake patch. Like all those indirect attempts you made to kill me."

"It's possible," Journey said.

"John Manuelito probably knew what you were up to. And I'll bet he knew the tunnels really well."

"Why are you so convinced it's John Manuelito?"

"I don't know." Alexandra looked up and down the corridor. "I know they've sealed off the sub-basements now. Is there still any way to get into them?"

"If there was, I wouldn't tell you about it."

"But is there a way?"

"Alexandra, I'll tell the Dean what you're up to if I have to. I swore to her that I wouldn't remain silent if any students were in danger, especially you."

"I'm not trying to get down there. I'm just wondering if they *really* sealed it off this time."

Journey sighed. "To my knowledge, they have. But it's very hard to be sure of anything where magic is involved."

"Can you still go down there?"

He gave her a long look. "They haven't warded the sub-basement against ghosts."

"How about Apparition?"

"The wards in Charmbridge's walls prevent Apparition, including below the school."

"What about elves?"

There was another long silence. "You know I hate a rat," the dead warlock said, "but just so we're being straight with each other, I think I'm going to have to tell Ms. Grimm about our little chat."

"Fine," Alexandra said, a little coldly. "All I've done is ask questions." She checked the time. "And now I have to go, before I miss curfew. You've been very helpful, Mr. Journey."

He said nothing as she left.

Halloween, and the Charmbridge Dueling Championship, was only a couple of weeks away, so when Torvald caught her outside the cafeteria one evening and asked if she wanted to practice dueling with him after dinner, she only hesitated for a moment before agreeing. There weren't many students who wanted to duel with her outside the club.

"But only if you're going to be serious about it," she told him. "Not that stupid hexem crap you play with Stuart."

"Aren't I serious in the club?" Torvald grinned at her. "If you're foolish enough to give me extra practice beating you before the real competition, I'm game."

"You've never beaten me."

His grin slipped for a moment. "Well, I was holding back."

"Uh huh. You know we're not allowed to duel in the gym without adult supervision."

"So we'll do what everyone else does: sneak outside."

Only juniors and seniors were allowed to leave the academy after dark. Sneaking out after curfew meant automatic detention for most students, and Alexandra doubted she would get off so lightly.

"Okay," she said. "Meet me in the fire pit west of the greenhouse." The greenhouse and the small trees next to it, as well as the depth of the fire pit, would shield them from view, and the wing of the academy that faced it was made up of classrooms that were unused at night.

He raised his wand in acknowledgment. "See you then, Troublesome."

Alexandra continued into the cafeteria. Constance and Forbearance had been sitting with Benjamin and Mordecai at meals for the past few days, so she was pleased when they joined her and Anna. Alexandra looked surreptitiously over her shoulder to see if the Rashes were glaring at them. They were.

David, who usually sat with the other boys during dinner, moved over to join them as well when he saw the Pritchards. "Hey. Are you allowed to sit with us again?"

"David Washington, you're worryin' my nerves," Constance said. Forbearance ignored him and unrolled a scroll across the cafeteria table. Alexandra realized after a moment that it was a star chart.

"Alex, I done your forecast for Halloween," Forbearance said, leaning forward to whisper across the table. "An' -"

"I done told her this is foolishness," Constance said, turning away from David to interrupt her sister. "Even if'n the stars got somethin' to say, you hain't skilled enough to read no one's signs."

Alexandra was looking around for the inevitable appearance of Sonja, but she was with the popular girls at the other end of the table. She had apparently not noticed the star chart or wasn't interested in breaking away from her current conversation to stick her nose into this one.

"I asked Mrs. Estrella to give a look," Forbearance said, "an' she said I'm right." Hastily, she added, "I din't tell her it was for you, Alex."

Alexandra sighed. "So what do the stars say?"

Forbearance didn't react to Alexandra's skepticism in her eagerness to show her discovery. "Take a gander - this is your star sign, an' that there's Mars, tied to your wand an' makin' your magical focus, an' this be the influence line from your birth to Halloween an' that's the lunar cycle correspondin' to times o' strife an' major works - see, it's a witch's moon - an' these here is your augery lines -"

"Forbearance, I have no idea what any of that means."

The litany of astrological terms ceased. Forbearance's hands fluttered over the chart and she looked from her vexed sister to Alexandra. Anna and David watched with careful neutrality.

"Look at the Seven Sisters," Forbearance said.

Alexandra studied the chart. The stars Forbearance indicated glowed red.

"And?" she asked at last.

"On Halloween night, you're in the most dangerous stellar latitude," Forbearance said.

Alexandra pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead. "What is a 'stellar latitude'? What is this supposed to be telling me, Forbearance, that I'm going to be in danger on Halloween? And what should I do about it, hide in my room?" She dropped her hands to the table. Forbearance's expression was dismayed and concerned. Constance folded her arms but kept her mouth shut.

"Seriously," Alexandra said, more gently, "what am I supposed to do?"

Forbearance swallowed. "Mrs. Estrella agreed that the stars is against you in any conflict or if'n you is involved with dire works - that's magic with any kind of, um, Dark influence..."

"Did you think I was planning to practice Dark Arts on Halloween?" Alexandra asked, with more than a touch of annoyance.

"No, 'course not." Forbearance flushed. "But it also means, well, Halloween would be a bad time for Dark Arts to be directed 'gainst you."

"I think any time would be a bad time for Dark Arts to be directed against me."

"Alex, dear, I know you don't take this seriously, but there is Arithmancy an' astronomy an' magical theory behind chartin' the influence of the stars above. This hain't just made-up folderol, whatever some people might think." Forbearance gave her sister a resentful glance.

"I promise to avoid anyone practicing Dark Arts on Halloween," Alexandra said.

"Conflict," Anna said. "The stars are against you in conflict -"

"If that means that the stars say I'm going to lose the dueling competition, well, screw the stars above," Alexandra said, causing the Pritchards to flinch. "Forbearance, I appreciate you looking out for me, I really do." Alexandra laid her hand across the unrolled

chart with its moving, spinning illustrations of heavenly bodies and slowly rotating hemispheres. "But I've never paid attention to the stars before. I don't see why I should now. I'm not saying it's nonsense - I just don't see the point in worrying about it."

Forbearance and Anna continued to plead with Alexandra as they ate their dinners. When Alexandra saw Torvald leaving the cafeteria with Stuart, he gave her a little wave and she nodded. She turned back to her friends. "Look, I have to go."

"Maybe you should think about not dueling for a while," Anna said.

Alexandra gave her an incredulous look. "Seriously?"

Anna sighed.

"I'll see you in the library later, okay?"

Alexandra left the cafeteria and returned to her room. Before she went outside to meet Torvald, she let Charlie out. She wanted her familiar with her.

Sneaking in and out of the school was not difficult, but it was never completely safe. The portraits hanging in the hallways were occasionally moved to watch intersections that had previously gone unmonitored, and sometimes alarm spells were put on exits. But the faculty and older students were coming and going all the time, and sneaking out a window was easy: Ms. Grimm had required personal brooms to be locked up this year, but there were still Falling Charms and ropes. So mostly the staff emphasized punishing those who were caught rather than futile attempts to prevent every ingenious method a student might devise to break curfew.

Although Alexandra still had a Skyhook in her backpack, she knew if she were caught using it Ms. Grimm would assume she was up to something sinister and take it away. So she used the main exit near the gymnasium. There was a possibility that an older student would see her and report her, but she saw no one as she sneaked out. It was getting cold, so there were fewer people venturing outside in the evening.

Charlie was waiting for her, sitting on the edge of the roof far overhead. When she stepped outside, the raven descended to land on her shoulder.

"Go check out the fire pit area, okay?" Alexandra said, pointing, but Charlie wouldn't take off until she produced an owl treat from a pocket in her cloak. "Greedy bird."

She found Torvald sitting on the edge of the fire pit with his legs dangling over the side, and Charlie perched on the opposite edge. Torvald sprang to his feet and gave Alexandra an exaggerated bow, as if they were about to begin a formal duel. "Your familiar announced you."

"Good bird," she said.

"Greedy bird," Charlie said. Alexandra tossed the raven another owl treat.

She walked to the edge of the pit and examined it. "We'd better not cast anything that leaves a mark. If either of us has to go to the infirmary, we'll be in trouble."

"Non-injurious takes away some of the best hexes," Torvald said. "You're not scared, are you?"

She wasn't scared, but she was wary. Torvald was a class clown. He'd never been malicious, but the possibility hadn't escaped her that he might be setting her up for a prank. She looked around carefully while pretending to examine the fire pit, but she saw no sign of his roommate or anyone else. A set of steps went down into the circular brick-lined pit. It was about twenty-five feet across, with an ash-filled hole at the very center. Sometimes it was used for picnic barbecues, and sometimes it was used to burn leaves. Once, she had almost been thrown into it by Clockworks acting on Mr. Journey's command.

"Are we going to practice *in* the pit?" Torvald asked. "It's half the size of a dueling platform."

"So you'll need to practice fast and short-range spells. You're not scared, are you?" She jumped down into the pit. "We're less likely to be seen down here."

Torvald stepped off the edge and landed a yard from her. "All right, close quarters is good - it's not so different from hexem. My advantage."

"Charlie, take off!" Alexandra commanded. She waited until the raven was no longer visible overhead, then asked, "Ready?" Torvald nodded.

He was expecting her Disarming Charm - he tried to move before she cast it - but his wand flew from his hand before he'd finished nodding.

"You said you were ready," she said, as he picked up his fallen wand.

He spun and cast a hex, but she already had a Shield Charm between them.

"C'mon, all that hexem rearranging your face and you can't do better than that?" she said.

Dueling constrained by distance and limited only to charms that wouldn't do worse than stun, paralyze, or temporarily deform the victim wasn't as good as a real duel, but it did give Alexandra practice in spotting the tell-tale movements of Torvald's hands, watching his feet and lips and fingers to guess what he would cast and when and react first. At close range there wasn't much chance of either of them missing, and both of them tended to attack more than they blocked. Alexandra Stunned Torvald four times in the next half hour. Though she hadn't hit him as hard as she could, he leaned against the wall and gasped for breath, clutching his bruised ribs, when they took a break.

Alexandra's legs were wobbly - she'd reversed the Jelly-Legs Jinx Torvald had hit her with, but she still couldn't quite stand up straight, and he'd Nettled her several times. She ran a hand over the side of her face; she'd felt something sting her there, but she wasn't sure what hex Torvald had cast. She grimaced when she felt a large, floppy ear covering half her face.

"That had better not be a real Transfiguration," she said. "If I need to have it reversed, Mrs. Murphy might ask me who did it."

"You won't tell her." When she scowled, Torvald waved a hand. "Just a standard sixth grade Enlarging Jinx."

"How exactly were you trying to win a duel by enlarging my ear?"

"I was aiming for your tongue, actually. You haven't learned non-verbal spellcasting yet, have you?" Torvald shook himself off and tried to brush some of the ash and dirt off his robes. Alexandra's Stunning Charms had knocked him off his feet, and once bounced him off the bricks of the pit.

He wasn't bad, and he probably would be more of a challenge when neither of them had to hold back. But Alexandra knew she'd beat him at the competition. He wasn't nearly as good as Larry.

"Want to practice some more?" she asked.

"It's getting late," he said. "Maybe we should quit while we're still both in one piece."

"I need more practice," she said. "C'mon, a few more rounds. I promise not to hurt you too much."

She hoped that would goad him into casting another hex, but he just grinned as he stepped close enough for the light from her wand to reflect off his teeth. "Your ear is shrinking back to normal."

She raised her free hand to the side of her head again. Her ear wasn't quite as large as it had been. "I'm fine - look, do you want to duel some more or not?"

"You're kind of obsessive," Torvald said. "Can I ask you a question?"

She lowered her wand. "What?"

He leaned against the wall a couple of feet from her. "Why do you go around acting like you're Bellatrix the Death Eater? We both know you're not really Dark at all."

Alexandra was so startled by the question, she answered it without thinking: "I don't act like I'm a Death Eater." Then she became indignant. "How do you know I'm not Dark? You don't know anything about me."

"I know all the rumors. You're the Enemy's daughter, you've been mixed up in Dark Arts every year, things happen around you..." Her expression made his voice trail off, then he spoke in as serious a tone as she'd ever heard from him. "I was in the Mors Mortis Society

too, remember? I was there when you quit, over a snake. That's not how a Dark Sorceress acts."

"I am Abraham Thorn's daughter. That's not a rumor." She paused when Charlie cawed, then said, "I've never claimed to be a Dark Sorceress, but people are going to believe what they want. Why do you care? If you really thought I was Dark, you wouldn't have come out here with me alone at night, would you?"

"No." He shuffled his feet a little, with an expression Alexandra couldn't quite figure out. "Is it true you have a boyfriend?"

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Sonja Rackham says you do, but she's a gossipy little thing."

She pointed her wand at him again. "Is there any reason any of this is your business?"

He opened his mouth, but was distracted by a flapping sound. Alexandra looked up, and saw black wings moving against the backdrop of stars.

"Charlie?" she called. But the shape was bigger than Charlie.

"Crap," she said, and raised her wand.

There was a bright flash of light. Torvald and Alexandra both threw their arms up to shield their eyes, but too late for Alexandra to avoid being blinded. She staggered against the wall behind her and waved her wand back and forth, but she couldn't see anything with the glowing after-image imprinted on her retinas.

A voice from above said, "I'd think you'd have learned to stay away from fire pits, Troublesome."

Alexandra pointed her wand in the direction of the voice. "If you hurt Charlie, Larry, I'll -" She yelped as something struck her hand and her wand flew from it. She clutched her right hand; it burned painfully.

"I'm not going to hurt your raven. Corwin might eat it, though."

"Hey, Larry, what's the big idea?" Torvald said. "We weren't bothering anyone."

"What were you doing, Krogstad? Merlin, please tell me you weren't making it with Quick. Even with that face, you can't be that hard up."

"Hey!" Torvald said indignantly.

Alexandra was sidling along the edge of the wall, probing with her foot and hoping she would feel her wand lying on the ground.

"Oh, leave them alone, Larry." This was a female voice: Bathsheba Anderson. She sounded more amused than annoyed. "Although I'd think even a couple of freshmen would find a more romantic spot than a fire pit."

"I'm a sophomore," Torvald said.

"We weren't looking for a 'romantic spot'!" Alexandra said. "We were -" She stopped.

"You were what?" Larry asked.

Alexandra could see a little now, and tried to blink away the stars blurring her vision. Her hand and forearm were so swollen that when she stumbled to her wand to pick it up, she could barely close her fingers around it. She looked up at the two figures standing at the edge of the fire pit. There was a dark, bird-like shape on the shoulder of one.

"What did you do to me?" she asked. Her arm really hurt.

"A Stinging Hex combined with a Swelling Jinx. Pretty effective, isn't it?" Larry sounded very smug.

"Excessive, even," Bathsheba said.

Larry glanced at her, then turned back to the couple in the shadows below. Alexandra could just make out the corners of a smile. "We're allowed to be out after dark, but you two would be in big trouble if someone turned you in."

"Don't be a sneak, Larry," Torvald said.

"Go ahead," Alexandra said. "I'll get detention and I'll probably be forbidden to participate in the dueling competition. Great way to spare yourself the humiliation of getting your ass kicked, by being a snitch."

"You really are a vulgar little goblin, aren't you?" Larry said. "Very well, I'll let you get back to your pawing and groping."

Alexandra was filled with fury, but she kept her mouth shut. It was Torvald who said, "It's not like that. We were dueling."

"Torvald!" Alexandra hissed.

"Dueling?" Larry asked.

"Dueling?" Bathsheba echoed.

Torvald said, "I swear, it's the truth. I'll tell everyone you're a liar if you spread rumors."

"I'll mess your face up in ways Mrs. Murphy can't fix, *sophomore!*" Larry pointed his wand at the younger boy.

Bathsheba put a hand on Larry's arm. "If you think this is impressing me, you're wrong."

Larry lowered his arm. "Is it true, Quick? You came out here to duel?"

"None of your business!" she snapped.

He was silent a moment, then he laughed. "If you wanted extra dueling practice, you should have told me. I'd have been happy to oblige you."

"Yeah, right. You're lucky that we're dueling formally on Halloween."

"Oh, because you'd do better dueling without formal rules?"

"Hell, yeah! In a wizard duel, I'd own you!"

"You'd what?"

"I'd kick your ass!"

"Stars, you've got a mouth. You know what? Any time you want a wizard duel, Quick, you tell me the time and the place."

"How about Halloween night?" she said. "Outside, after the feast."

There was a moment of hushed surprise. Alexandra breathed in and out rapidly, as her temper faded. Her arm felt like deadweight on fire.

"Are you serious?" Larry asked.

"Are you afraid?"

"You're both being foolish," Bathsheba said. "You're going to duel each other in front of the whole school - what's the point in a rematch afterward?"

"Wizard dueling is the real thing," Alexandra said.

"It can get you in real trouble," Torvald said.

"Don't worry, Larry's all talk." Alexandra couldn't stop, even though she knew she was removing any possibility of either of them backing down.

"Says the witch with the mouth but not the talent," Larry said.

Torvald groaned. "You're both insane, you know that?"

Larry asked, "Any stakes? Or just the pleasure of knocking you into the dirt twice?"

Alexandra thought a moment, then grinned despite the burning in her arm. "Loser agrees to step aside and keep your mouth shut every time we see each other, the rest of the time we're at Charmbridge. And leave my friends alone, too."

Larry's mouth curled into a smile of his own. "So you'll act like a whipped house-elf every time you see me, just like your Ozarker friends around Ben and Mordecai? Really?"

"You're the one who's going to be rolling over and hanging his head."

"Oh, Merlin, Morgan, and Medb!" Bathsheba said. "If you're going to do it, just agree to the terms and let's go! I'm not going to stand here listening to you two posture all night."

"I accept." Larry twirled his wand and sheathed it. "This is going to be the best Halloween ever."

Bathsheba pulled him away before Alexandra could retort. She was left standing alone in the pit with Torvald.

He shook his head. "You're nuts, you know that? You don't really think you can beat him, do you?"

"I'm going to beat him." She put her own wand away. "Thanks for the practice."

"My pleasure," he said sarcastically, but Alexandra was already climbing the steps out of the pit and calling for Charlie.

Between You and Me

Alexandra and Anna sat alone together in the cafeteria the next day. David sat with the other boys, Sonja and Carol sat with the other ninth grade girls who had mostly shunned Alexandra since sixth grade, and Constance and Forbearance sat with the Rashes.

In their Wizarding Citizenship class, Forbearance passed Alexandra a note:

'It might be difficult for us to meet you in the library for a little while, and we can't sit together in the cafeteria. Please don't be upset. Can I come to your room Saturday morning?'

Alexandra wrote 'Sure' and passed the note back. She only noticed afterward that Forbearance had written 'I' - not 'we.'

Saturday morning, Forbearance came to her room with scrolls and books clutched to her chest. Alexandra and Anna watched as she spread charts and graphs out on both their desks and laid an extremely complicated map of stars and astrological signs across Alexandra's bed.

"Where's Constance?" Alexandra asked.

Forbearance was bent over the map with her back to Alexandra and Anna, but they could hear a slight edge in her voice. "Studyin' somethin' more *important* an' *useful*, I 'magine."

"I thought you usually study together," Anna said.

"Maybe so, but as it happens we'uns wasn't actually stitched together at birth," Forbearance said.

Alexandra and Anna looked at each other. Forbearance straightened and turned around to face them. "Oh, Anna, dear, I'm sorry." She passed a hand in front of her face. "There's no call for me to be so tetchous."

"It's all right," Anna said.

"Is Constance on your case again about astrology?" Alexandra asked.

"If'n 'on my case' means she scoffles every time I mention it, then yes." Forbearance sat down on Alexandra's bed. "She says it hain't fit or academical, an' only warlocks, pagans, an' durgens reckon by the stars above."

"Well, you don't have to do my chart," Alexandra said, feeling guilty about her own silent scoffing. "I don't want you and Constance to fight about this."

"I hain't gonna drop my Astrology class, Alex. And anyhow, this hain't really 'bout you or astrology."

"You sure it's not about me?" Alexandra sat next to Forbearance. "Aren't you getting in trouble with Benjamin and Mordecai because you keep hanging out with me?"

"Connie an' I are still o' one mind where you're concerned, Alex, dear, you be sure of that. Benjamin an' Mordecai is a trial, it's true, but we'uns'll square it our own selves. Please don't you nevermind 'bout them."

"Okay," Alexandra said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Forbearance hesitated, then shook her head. "Not just now. But thank you, truly." She turned to her charts. "I know your birth date, but not what time you was born. Also, I need to know when both your parents was born, an' when you first showed magic."

Alexandra opened her mouth, but they were interrupted by a knock on the door to the bathroom. Sonja opened it before she or Anna could say anything.

"Hi," Sonja said. "I thought I heard Forbearance's voice. Are you doing Alexandra's star chart?"

"Come right on in, Sonja." The memory of what had happened in the forest only a few days earlier blunted the sarcasm in Alexandra's voice. Sonja immediately entered and leaned over to examine the chart. One animated planet was spinning on the parchment, casting a red glow on its smaller siblings who had shrunk in relation to it.

"Mars - that figures. But you haven't calculated her Aspects or guiding and influential Powers or their Domains."

"I was gettin' to that." Forbearance also betrayed a slight hint of irritation.

Alexandra hesitated. "I don't actually know what time I was born."

"Hain't your ma never told you?" Forbearance asked.

Alexandra frowned. She'd asked her mother a lot of questions about herself and her father when she was little - questions her mother had always refused to answer. She had been born in the Chicago university hospital where her mother had been studying nursing. She wasn't sure if she'd ever seen her birth certificate.

"Well, Mrs. Estrella says we can chart by noon and midnight and estimate," Sonja said. "Do you know if you were born in the morning, afternoon, or evening?"

"Morning, I think," Alexandra said. She didn't actually know.

Forbearance pointed with her wand. One star on the chart glowed blue-white, and a third of the sky glowed more brightly while another third dimmed. "Now see, I charted the Power governing magic by her wand - hickory wood an' chimaera hair. That weren't easy to look up; chimaera hair hain't listed in most books."

"When did you first show you were magical?" Sonja asked.

"I don't know," Alexandra muttered. "My mother never talked about that, either."

Both girls gave her another look.

"I remember transforming things by the time I was five." *On the playground, with Brian...*

"We'uns can work from that," Forbearance said. She and Sonja resumed discussing signs, houses, Aspects, traits, rising and crossing and degrees and other terms that were nonsense to Alexandra. Except one they used repeatedly.

"What's this stuff about Powers?" she asked. "I thought nobody believes in Powers anymore."

"Well," Forbearance said uncomfortably, "whether Powers is real so's you could talk to 'em, that's..."

"They're *symbolic*," Sonja said. "Of course Powers aren't actual Beings - they're just how wizards in the ancient world represented magical forces they didn't understand yet."

Forbearance remained tight-lipped, and Anna kept her eyes fixed on the star charts. They knew about Alexandra's meeting with the Most Deathly Power.

"But those forces are real," Sonja went on, like a lecturer. "You may think astrology is nonsense - a lot of wizards do, just because Muggles copied wizard astrology and of course they didn't get anything right, so now astrology has become associated with Muggles and Powers. But don't be so skeptical, Alexandra. You didn't grow up in the wizarding world, so there are probably some things you still don't understand. There are things you might not even believe yet."

"Really?" Alexandra's expression was deadpan.

Sonja nodded. "You have to keep an open mind."

"I'll try."

Anna bit her lip; she almost looked amused.

Forbearance picked up her quill, and she and Sonja went through a surprising number of calculations, drawing complex diagrams which they kept crossing out and redrawing. The stars moved about like migrating sparks of light, planets and constellations rose from the surface of the parchment and drifted into new positions on the chart, and images like ghostly watermarks moved beneath the lines and letters. Alexandra became interested in spite of herself. She soon gathered that the other two girls were not pleased by what they were finding.

"That's not a good sign," Sonja said, adding a line from Alexandra's birth symbol to another star. The symbol Alexandra recognized as representing her, or one of the symbols representing her, had turned a sickly green. "You either crossed over or under Nibiru..."

Forbearance became upset. "I done told you Babylonian wizards was wicked an' even Mrs. Estrella says their charts hain't reliable -" Then she drew in a breath. "Oh."

"What?" Alexandra asked.

"That's an Ozarker constellation," Forbearance said. "You was born under Troublesome's signs."

Alexandra snorted.

"Hain't a good thing, Alex."

Sonja said, "Wait, you don't think ancient Babylonian wizards knew what they were talking about, but you want to go by Ozarker folk tales? Troublesome isn't a person; she can't have signs."

"Ozarker 'folk tales' is based on magical principles," Forbearance said. "It might surprise you to know we'uns understand *symbols* and *metaphors* too. An' also, Troublesome is so a person."

Alexandra said, "Look, this is all interesting, but you don't really believe the stars control our lives, do you?"

"Of course not," Forbearance said.

"That's not what we learn in Astrology at all," Sonja said. "Nobody controls you. But if you pay attention to the stars you can see what's going to happen in your life. What you do about it is up to you."

"Fine," Alexandra said. "So what's going to happen in my life?"

"The stars above don't just spell out dates an' times," Forbearance said. "It's more a matter of..." Her voice trailed off as she studied the chart they'd been compiling.

"Oh, Mrs. Estrella isn't going to like that," Sonja said.

"Who cares what Mrs. Estrella likes? What does it say?" Alexandra asked. Even Anna was leaning over her shoulder now.

"Well, um, that's the sign for 'calamity' and that's the sign for 'trouble' and that's the sign for 'pride' and that's the sign for 'evil' -"

"The stars say I'm evil?"

"No, no, no," Forbearance said. "Just that certain stars is, well, influential on you."

"This is really helpful." Alexandra saw Anna's worried look. "No offense, guys, but I don't think anyone's life is determined by a star chart when they're fourteen."

"Of course it don't determine your life," Forbearance said.

"Oh, look, her Powers!" Sonja said, as the stars on the chart stopped moving and settled into place.

Alexandra turned back around. "What Powers?"

"The Seven Sisters."

Alexandra's eyebrows went up. So did Anna's.

"And what does that mean?" Alexandra asked, somewhat less skeptically.

"Well, the Seven Sisters are really powerful," Sonja said. "Which means you're supposed to be really powerful."

"Cool."

"And have a powerful destiny."

"Even better." Alexandra grinned.

"The youngest Sister is fated for trouble an' early ends," Forbearance said, much more quietly. She consulted one of her books. "The Seven Sisters is associated with war, sacrifice, betrayal, secrets, night, vengeance, forgiveness, water, oceans, May, sowin'..."

"Is there anything they're not associated with?"

Sonja and Forbearance looked at her blankly. Anna wasn't amused.

Alexandra sighed. "Okay, this is all really interesting -"

Everyone but her jumped when something rapped sharply on the window. It wasn't Charlie demanding to be let in, but an owl bearing a letter tied to its leg.

Alexandra opened the window, but when she reached a hand out, the owl snapped at her and hooted at Anna.

"It's for you," Alexandra said. Anna rarely received any mail except letters delivered by her own owl from her parents.

Anna took an owl treat out of the bag she kept for Jingwei and let the owl gobble it up as she untied the letter. She unrolled the envelope, then handed it to Alexandra. "No, it's for you."

The owl hooted and flew off, while Alexandra read the return address. It was from Payton. She cleared her throat. "Okay, are we done with star charting today?"

"Who's it from?" Sonja asked.

"None of your business."

"Well, excuse me!"

Forbearance's eyes lit up. "Is it from...?" Then she covered her mouth, as Alexandra flushed.

Sonja's eyes also lit up. "It's from your boyfriend, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"Get out."

"Oh, come on."

"We hain't finished with your chart, Alex," Forbearance said.

"Fine." Alexandra walked to the other side of the room and turned her back on them while she opened the letter.

There was just a little slip of parchment in the envelope. *Strange*, she thought. Payton didn't write on parchment - he sent her letters written on plain paper stationary.

The words didn't make sense. They glowed red, then turned black and made blind spots in her vision. They grew and eclipsed everything else even as she tried to read them. Icy fingers clamped around her throat, and something black and terrible clutched at her heart. She didn't even have time to gasp before she fell.

Something loosened painfully in her chest, and Alexandra opened her eyes. She was burning.

A bearded, scowling face loomed over her. She wasn't in her room, but her vision was all red and black and spotty. What parts of her that weren't numb hurt.

"...almost killed her..."

"The curse is only half the problem."

She gulped air. She felt fingers strangling her, but there were no hands on her throat.

"Close your mouth, girl. You're gaping like a fish."

"Glaucus, please -"

"I'm not a cursed Healer. You comfort her."

Their voices were very loud. Alexandra mumbled something, with a tongue that had shriveled in her mouth.

"Stop trying to talk," the bearded ogre snapped. "I'm trying to keep you from dying, and nothing you say is going to help."

"Neither is berating the poor girl." The owner of the softer voice held her hand.

"Can you identify the poison?" That was another voice, cooler and harder.

"If that fool Ozarker hadn't burned the parchment -"

"Then someone else might have touched it. Can you identify the poison, Mr. Grue?"

"With time that Miss Quick doesn't have. I'm going to put her in a coma. She should go to the hospital."

Alexandra flinched as Mr. Grue put a hand behind her head and pressed something to her lips. "Drink!" he commanded.

In her fevered state, Alexandra was sure that this monster who had hated her for years was now trying to poison her. She refused to open her lips. Grue cursed and pressed thumb and forefinger painfully to either side of her jaw, trying to force her mouth open.

She raised a hand to slap his hand away, but someone caught it and held it.

"Glaucus!" Mrs. Murphy said, and then Alexandra heard Ms. Grimm's voice in her ear. It was soft, as Alexandra had never heard Ms. Grimm speak before, but insistent: "Alexandra, drink the potion. You will die if you don't. Trust me."

Alexandra parted her lips, and Mr. Grue dumped what felt like a gallon of sickly-sweet liquid down her throat. She gagged as it spilled out of her mouth. She sputtered something at Mr. Grue, who pressed his rough hand against her face. She fell asleep before she could struggle.

When she opened her eyes again, light was shining through the windows, and she knew she was in the infirmary. She also knew she had been asleep for a long time. She remembered Mr. Grue telling them about Hundred-Year Sleep Potion the previous year. She put a hand to her face, for a moment imagining she might have a beard like Rip Van Winkle. That was an absurd thought. She giggled. Then she clamped a hand over her mouth in horror. She'd *giggled*!

"Is she going to be all right?" a voice asked.

A hand touched her forehead. Alexandra felt dizzy and wondered if she were delirious. Livia Pruett was standing over her. She was wearing a plain blue robe; the collar of a white blouse was visible beneath it.

"Can you tell me your name and your birth date?" Livia asked.

Alexandra's eyes unfocused. "Alexandra... Octavia Quick. March twenty-second, nineteen ninety-six. Why are you here?"

"Ah, her attitude is unchanged. Excellent."

Alexandra turned her head. Ms. Grimm was sitting in a chair next to her bed, holding Galen in her lap. The cat watched Alexandra and purred as the Dean stroked it.

"You're going to be a bit light-headed," Livia said. She called in a louder voice, "Mrs. Murphy, can we get Alexandra something to eat?"

"Oh, she's awake!" Mrs. Murphy came around the partition surrounding Alexandra's bed, beamed at her, then hurried away.

"How long have I been asleep?" Alexandra asked.

"Three days," Livia said.

Alexandra started to sit up, but the effort seemed to drain all the blood from her head. She collapsed, dizzy.

"After you get something to eat, maybe you can start trying to move about," Livia said. "You should recover fairly quickly, but you'll be weak for a while. You really should have been in a hospital - either a wizard hospital or a Muggle one."

"We very much appreciate your help," Ms. Grimm said.

Livia turned away. "I'll be going now."

"Wait," Alexandra said. "Why did you come?"

"Dean Grimm summoned me." Livia glared at the Dean. "That's twice in as many months I've been dragged back into the wizarding world. You're as bad as your sister."

"I'm so sorry I inconvenienced you to save your sister's life," Ms. Grimm said.

"Wait," Alexandra said again. "If you don't care, why didn't you just let me die?"

Livia answered with exasperation: "I'm a doctor. I was a Healer. I can't just let someone die." She hesitated, made a motion as if she might reach a hand out to the girl on the bed, then dropped it to her side. "It's not that I don't care, Alexandra. But... I have a family. I have a life now, untainted by being Abraham Thorn's daughter. There's nothing in the wizarding world worth risking that. I'm sorry - it's not personal."

"Not personal," Alexandra repeated. "Right."

There was a long silence. Then Livia said, "Good luck, Alexandra."

Alexandra closed her eyes. "Thanks for saving me."

She listened to Livia's footsteps echo all the way out into the hallway, where she stopped to talk to someone in a low voice, before continuing on.

She heard a pop and opened her eyes. An elf stood on the edge of her bed, bearing a tray of food. The elf was not looking at her, but at Ms. Grimm.

"M-Mister Remy s-said M-Miss Quick needed I-I-lunch," the elf stammered.

"Thank you, Zipf," Ms. Grimm said. "You may leave the tray."

Alexandra sat up. The elf bobbed his head and let Alexandra take the tray on her lap before disappearing again with a pop. Alexandra's stomach rumbled and she realized she was starving. That was undoubtedly part of the reason she was so light-headed. The tray held fresh cornbread and soup, peppermeat sausage - one of her favorites - and green beans. There was also a glass of pumpkin juice, which she was not partial to, but she was thirsty as well as hungry, so she gulped half of it down and then grabbed the cornbread, before pausing to look at Ms. Grimm, who hadn't said anything since Zipf had left.

"Go ahead and eat," Ms. Grimm said.

Alexandra didn't bother tearing the cornbread; she just stuffed it into her mouth. It tasted wonderful, and her stomach rumbled again violently. While she swallowed the first mouthful of cornbread, Mrs. Murphy walked back in, carrying a flask and a small cup, which she set on the stand next to the bed.

"Don't stuff yourself all at once or you'll be sick," Mrs. Murphy warned her. Alexandra tried to slow down her chewing.

Ms. Grimm resumed petting Galen. "Your friends have come to see you every day."

"I finally had to forbid them to visit except after school," Mrs. Murphy said. "Oh - Miss Chu made me promise that I would tell you as soon

as you woke up that she's taking care of your familiars. She knew you'd be worried about them."

Alexandra nodded and fumbled to pick up a knife and fork to cut the peppermeat sausage. "Thanks."

"You're to drink all of this potion when you finish eating," Mrs. Murphy said. "You're going to spend another night here in the infirmary" - Alexandra grimaced - "but if I am satisfied with your color by this afternoon, I'll let your friends come stay with you until curfew."

Alexandra held up a hand, wondering what was wrong with her color. She was shocked at the ashen pallor of her skin, with traces of blue along the veins in the back of her hand. Her fingers were bandaged.

Mrs. Murphy glanced at Ms. Grimm, then walked away, leaving the two of them alone except for Galen.

"Well," Ms. Grimm said, "what am I going to do with you, Miss Quick?"

Alexandra dropped her hand to her lap. "I don't know." Her stomach rumbled some more, so she reached for her fork and stabbed the sausage. She watched Ms. Grimm while she chewed. The Dean was as cool and composed as ever, but there was an unfamiliar tension in her posture.

Ms. Grimm spoke again while Alexandra ate. "Whoever was trying to kill you didn't use half-measures. That parchment contained both a curse and a contact poison. If one didn't get you, the other one should have. Miss Pritchard burned the parchment to ashes even before you fell, hence the blisters on your fingers. That probably saved you from a lethal dose, but unfortunately made it harder for Mr. Grue to identify what poison had been used, and for Miss Gambola to determine just what sort of curse struck you. She thinks it was a Glyph of some sort, since Miss Chu's inexperienced attempt at curse-breaking actually appeared to have some effect."

Alexandra swallowed a half-chewed piece of sausage. "Anna countered the curse?"

"No, but she weakened it enough that you were still alive when Miss Gambola arrived. So you owe your life to Miss Chu and Miss

Pritchard both. And Miss Rackham, who had the presence of mind to run for help the moment you fell. Of course, it's really Miss Gambola and Mr. Grue who saved you, with a little help from Ms. Shirtliffe and Mrs. Murphy, and then, of course, Ms. Pruett... excuse me, *Doctor* Pruett... who enabled your recovery. I think you have quite a few thank-you notes to be writing."

Alexandra looked at her hand again, and flexed her fingers. Her fingertips didn't hurt, and she wanted to peel off the bandages. Instead, she resumed eating. Write a thank-you letter to Mr. Grue? How humiliating!

"I had to tell Diana about this incident," Ms. Grimm went on. "The Wizard Justice Department is trying to track the origin of that owl now."

Alexandra's eyes widened; she almost dropped her fork. "Is Payton going to be in trouble? I'm sure he didn't send it."

"I doubt very much he did." Ms. Grimm's eyes took on a familiar icy sheen. "But I would like you to explain how a letter to you bypassed the security measures we implemented to prevent this very sort of thing from happening."

"I'm sure you asked Anna, so you already know. I told Julia and Payton to address their letters to her." Alexandra looked down at her food. The soup was still steaming and the green beans were warm and buttery, and she was still hungry, but her appetite was seeping away. "I didn't want Mr. Grue reading my personal mail."

"Foolish, foolish girl. Do you really think Mr. Grue cares to read the correspondence of teenage girls? He would have detected that curse."

Alexandra said nothing.

"You endangered yourself and your friends. Imagine if Miss Chu had opened that envelope -"

"I know!" Alexandra wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Ms. Grimm fell silent. Alexandra was surprised not to be lectured for her impertinence. She thought about Anna being simultaneously cursed and poisoned by a letter meant for her. Alexandra didn't even

know curse-breaking! She sniffled. Why was she acting so weird? First giggling, and now crying.

"Mrs. Murphy and Dr. Pruett both warned that you may not be quite yourself for a while," Ms. Grimm said, as if reading her mind.

Alexandra didn't look at her or answer, so the Dean went on. "We've kept most of the details from circulating publicly. Rumors will circulate regardless, but it was not difficult to impress upon your friends the desirability of discretion."

Alexandra snorted. Sonja would have told half the school by the time Alexandra reached the infirmary. But she couldn't exactly hold that against her. Apparently, she owed Sonja her life, too.

"It does leave me with the problem of what to do with you, however," Ms. Grimm said.

Alexandra stared at her tray for a few seconds, then looked up to meet Ms. Grimm's eyes.

"Maybe I should go home," she said.

She had seen Ms. Grimm angry, injured, worried, and even occasionally sympathetic. She'd rarely seen her surprised. Only her eyes showed it; her expression barely changed. But even Galen felt something, as the cat's eyes also went from sleepy half-mast to wide alertness. In a tone of voice that was almost shocked, the Dean asked, "Are you afraid to stay here at Charmbridge, Alexandra?"

"No. But... what everyone says is true. Trouble follows me. Someone is really trying to kill me, and doesn't care if they get someone else instead. I'm..." Alexandra's voice choked. "People die around me. I am dangerous to know."

Ms. Grimm was silent for a long time. Her long fingers curled beneath Galen's chin, stroking the cat thoughtfully. She allowed Alexandra to calm herself. Then she said, "Do you think you would be safer at home? Do you think your parents and your Muggle friends would be safer?"

Alexandra shook her head. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You allow the staff here at Charmbridge, which includes many excellent wizards and witches with experience fighting Dark Arts, to do their jobs, and protect you and everyone else on these grounds. You allow the WJD to conduct its investigation. You do as you're told, and don't try to find your would-be killer yourself."

"What happens when I go home? What about Christmas break?"

"I've spoken to Diana about that. There will be some additional security measures put in place."

Alexandra grimaced. "Are they even looking for John Manuelito?"

"You'd have to ask Diana that." Ms. Grimm tilted her head, just as Galen's ears twitched. "I believe your friends are coming."

"Wait," Alexandra said, as Ms. Grimm rose. "Why did you bring Livia here?"

"You needed a Healer. A very good one." Ms. Grimm glanced in the direction of the nurse's office, and lowered her voice. "Mrs. Murphy is quite competent, but your sister..." The Dean sighed. "She was one of the best, before she decided to go Wandless."

"Better than any of the Healers at the Queen of Chicago Sanatorium?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But bringing you to the hospital would make this incident more public than would be good for either of us. It was a calculated risk. I..." Ms. Grimm hesitated, and Alexandra saw something she'd never seen before. The Dean looked uncertain. "I might not have been able to keep you here at school were the full details known."

"You mean... you'd have to expel me if everyone else's parents knew that there's really a Dark Wizard out to get me?" Alexandra swallowed. "Maybe you should."

"You sound as if you want to be expelled, Miss Quick." Ms. Grimm turned, as Anna, David, and all three of the Pritchards skidded to an abrupt halt upon seeing her.

"As you can see, Miss Quick is awake," the Dean said pleasantly. "And if you conduct yourselves appropriately and don't tax your

friend's recuperation with too much activity, I believe Mrs. Murphy will allow you to remain here for a while."

There was a chorus of 'thank you ma'am's, and Ms. Grimm looked over her shoulder at Alexandra. "We will speak later, Miss Quick. In the meantime, please stop bothering Mr. Journey in the basement."

Alexandra's friends stepped aside as she strode out of the infirmary. Alexandra watched her retreating back, and Galen's tail flicking side to side, then forced a smile to show her friends. "Hi, guys."

A tearful Anna embraced Alexandra. Constance and Forbearance also wept as they hugged her. Innocence wore a grave expression and was dressed like a proper Ozarker, complete with bonnet, which she normally abandoned at school, but her eyes were dry as she kissed Alexandra's cheek. "We was terrible worried 'bout you!" she said.

David slouched against the partition, with his hands in the pockets of his robes. "Hey. How you feeling?"

She was feeling crowded. Gently, she nudged her friends back a little and picked up her still-unfinished bowl of soup. "Hungry. And a little light-headed. And confused and worried... you know."

David nodded. He took a moment to speak again. "I'm glad you're all right."

She gave him a weak grin. "Don't get all mushy on me."

He rolled his eyes. Constance *tsked*.

Alexandra was unprepared for all the other people who visited her that evening. Sonja came by, ostensibly to see how she was doing, but also to ply her for more information. She wanted to know everything about the curse, the poison, and what Ms. Grimm had said to her. Alexandra tried to be vague without brushing Sonja off; the other girl had, after all, helped save her.

Several members of the JROC came to see her. Charlotte Barker sneaked a piece of pie out of the cafeteria for her. Mage-Sergeant Major Keedle told her he hoped she'd be recovered in time for the Halloween dueling competition. Innocence returned with William. Even Torvald and Stuart stopped in. Torvald said it was to get some

Blister, Boil, and Bruise Cream from Mrs. Murphy, as his face once again bore the marks of a brutal game of hexem with Stuart, but he chatted with and teased Alexandra until Mrs. Murphy kicked him out, telling him it was almost curfew.

The next morning, Mrs. Murphy pronounced her fit to resume attending classes, but instructed her to stop by every evening for a week, and gave her a note excusing her from JROC exercise. Alexandra returned to her room, to an overjoyed Anna and an excited Charlie.

Nigel, as far as she could tell, had not noticed her absence.

She showered and changed into her JROC uniform before walking with all of her friends to breakfast. Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence defied the Rashes and sat with her, and Alexandra ignored the stares and the whispers and the attention, and pushed aside the fears that had been worming their way into her mind.

As she sat at the freshman table between Anna and Forbearance eating a breakfast of cold cereal and grapefruit, Larry Albo walked past carrying his tray. Wade and Ethan were following him, as usual, but while they glowered at Alexandra, Larry's expression was more calculating.

"Heard you almost died, Quick," he said.

"You wish," she said.

Larry laughed. "I've seen people do desperate things to avoid a hiney-hexing, but if you wanted out of the dueling competition, you didn't have to stage some fake murder attempt."

Anna clenched her fists and David rose to his feet.

"David," Constance whispered, glancing across the cafeteria. Dean Calvert, the chaperone on duty, was already focusing his attention on them.

Alexandra sneered at Larry. "I'd have suspected you, except whoever tried to kill me was almost halfway competent, so it was obviously someone else."

Larry gave her a smirk, then said to David, "Who do you think you're kidding, you bench-sitting little goblin? Next time you feel like waving your wand in front of the witches, you'd better be ready to use it."

While David snarled and the girls flushed, Larry and his friends walked over to join the Rashes at the juniors' table.

"Can you really beat him?" David asked, sitting down slowly. "Cause I really, really want to see it."

"Maybe you should take some time off from dueling," Anna said. "Like, the rest of the year."

"No way," Alexandra said, cutting open her grapefruit. "I'm going to beat him."

The Pritchards and the Rashes argued outside the cafeteria that morning. Alexandra wanted to step in, but a pleading look from Forbearance told her it would do more harm than good. She dragged David away, and they went to Mrs. Middle's class and waited for Constance and Forbearance to arrive. The Ozarkers were more somber than usual.

After class, Alexandra asked them, "Did they threaten to tell your parents about you hanging out with me again?"

"They already done it," Forbearance said.

"I thought after Innocence..." Alexandra left the rest unsaid. The twins didn't approve of Innocence's extortion of the Rashes the previous year.

"Innocence can't threaten to set the fur on them no more," Constance said. "She already done it this summer."

"Gave out that Benjamin and Mordecai was whupped by... well, you," Forbearance said. "Tale spread throughout the Five Hollers. They was made low by it, you can be sure."

"Great." Alexandra felt no triumph in the Rashes' humiliation. She suspected it had only made her a more undesirable associate as far as the Ozarkers were concerned.

"We'un'll be fine, Alex, dear." Forbearance smiled reassuringly.

The bell for second period rang, and Alexandra and David went to their Advanced Magical Theory class while Anna and the Pritchards went to theirs.

"I don't get why they have to listen to those punks at all," David said.

"It's an Ozarker thing. I don't get it either. But you're not making it easier on them," Alexandra said.

David stewed, but said nothing.

At lunch, the Pritchards sat with the Rashes again.

In Herbology class, the first time Alexandra had been back in class since the mandrake incident, they spent all day indoors while Mrs. Verde began showing them how to use their wands to separate, slice, crush, and grind herbs. The charms were simple, but Alexandra discovered that it took a certain amount of finesse. They would have been very useful charms to know during her three miserable years in Mr. Grue's Alchemy classes.

When she joined the JROC formation in sixth period, Ms. Shirtliffe looked her over and said, "No broom drills for you, Quick. Take the new wands and drill them in forms and courtesies."

Alexandra hated being treated as an invalid. While the older students were all outside on their brooms, she worked with the sixth and seventh graders in the gymnasium until the end of class. Nearby, the sixth graders who weren't in JROC practiced basic magical defense under the tutelage of Miss Gambola. Alexandra saw Mary Dearborn among them.

The bell ending sixth period chimed. The young JROC wands began filing out of the gymnasium to join the formation outside, but Alexandra was crossing the gymnasium before she thought about what she was doing. The sixth graders were already dispersing, so Alexandra was only ten feet away from Mary when the other girl, walking with a friend, noticed her.

Mary turned pale. A silence spread around them.

Alexandra thought, *I should have done this in private*. Then she immediately contradicted herself: *No, this should be in public*. And how likely was it that Mary Dearborn would meet her in private?

"Mary," she said, not loudly, but easily heard by everyone around them, "I have something to say to you."

Mary didn't move or speak.

It took Alexandra a moment to summon her words.

"I'm sorry about Darla. I'm really sorry. I don't know if you believe me, but I never wanted what happened to happen." She didn't even know how much Mary actually knew about what had happened to her sister.

Mary still didn't say anything, and she didn't move. Neither did the large circle of sixth graders around them.

Alexandra cleared her throat. "I lost my older brother. I know how it feels."

Mary finally spoke. "You're sorry."

"Yes."

"You killed her," Mary said.

The silence around them intensified. Alexandra was sure that they could be heard from one end of the gym to the other.

She shook her head. "No, I didn't -" *I tried to save her*.

This had been a bad idea.

"You killed her," Mary said in a louder voice, "and you're *sorry*?"

"That's not true. Whatever you heard, Mary, I didn't kill Darla. I'm -" She was going to say, "I'm not responsible for her death," but she couldn't make herself say that.

"You killed her," Mary repeated, slowly. And what she said next made Alexandra's blood burn hot and her face turn cold: "I heard you killed your brother, too."

Miss Gambola was walking toward them. Ms. Shirtliffe was calling her name. Alexandra stepped closer to Mary, and closer still, and though the girl's eyes widened and she began to tremble, she didn't back away like the kids around her.

"Whatever you believe," Alexandra said, in a voice that she kept from shaking only by exerting every ounce of her self-control, "if you have a grudge against me, then bring it to me. Not my friends, not other people. It's between you and me."

"Are you threatening me?" Mary did back away from her then. Her eyes filled with tears, and she sounded on the verge of hysteria. "First you say you're *sorry* my sister is dead, and then you *threaten* me?"

"No, that's not -"

"What's going on here, Alexandra?" asked Miss Gambola, scattering students with her arrival.

Mary said, "I hope you get what you deserve!" Then she hurried away, wiping at her eyes.

"I just wanted to tell her I was sorry," Alexandra said.

She couldn't tell whether Miss Gambola believed her, but Ms. Shirtliffe was there in the next instant. "What the hell were you thinking, Quick?"

"I swear, I didn't threaten her, ma'am."

Ms. Shirtliffe grabbed her arm and dragged her outside, with Miss Gambola following. Alexandra didn't resist. Once they were standing in the dirt outside the academy building, Ms. Shirtliffe said, "Didn't Dean Grimm tell you to stay away from her?"

"Yes. I just wanted to -"

"Who cares what you want, Quick?" Ms. Shirtliffe asked angrily. "How could you possibly think confronting her would turn out well, whatever you intended? Did you think 'I'm sorry' would make anything better? Or that maybe you'd shock a confession out of her?"

"A confession?" Miss Gambola was appalled. "You actually accused Mary?"

"I didn't accuse her," Alexandra said. "I -"

"You what?" Ms. Shirtliffe demanded.

Alexandra didn't answer. She forced herself to meet the teacher's gaze, but she closed her mouth.

"Sometimes you amaze me, Quick. And not in a good way." Ms. Shirtliffe made a curt gesture. "Go near that girl again and you'll be back in the Dean's office. Dismissed."

Alexandra stalked away feeling angry and frustrated. Unfortunately, Dueling Club was immediately after school, which meant being right back under Ms. Shirtliffe's eye.

"No dueling for you," Shirtliffe said.

"Ma'am!" Alexandra protested. "Mrs. Murphy said I'm fine."

"Quit whining. You can practice drawing and targeting, but no matches. That's final. Not until you bring me a note from Mrs. Murphy specifically saying it's safe for you to duel. And convince me you can act like a mature, responsible witch, while we're on the subject of reasons for you not to duel."

While Alexandra fired hexes at flying ceramic ducks, Larry dueled with Daniel Keedle, Charlotte Barker, Ermanno DiSilvio, and Bathsheba Anderson, getting valuable practice time. Alexandra simmered.

Another duck burst as she blasted it. Then Larry, from his position atop the dueling platform, cast a spell that knocked three targets out of the air, raining glittering shards onto the sand, and made a mocking gesture of salute at Alexandra with his wand.

"Albo! Do that again and you're suspended from dueling," Ms. Shirtliffe snapped.

His face stiffened. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I was just showing Quick how you cast hexes when you're doing it for real."

"For real?" Shirtliffe stepped up onto the platform and stared at him. "What do you know about dueling 'for real,' Albo? Have you ever been in a real wizard duel?"

"My coach..."

"Oh, you have a coach?"

"During the summer," Larry said. "I was coached by Basil Toynbee."

"Your parents hired a professional duelist to coach you? Then why is your technique so sloppy and your form worse than the some of the eighth graders'? Spend less time bragging and more time practicing, Albo. Sports dueling isn't the same as wizard dueling."

Larry's face colored as Ms. Shirtliffe turned her back on him. Alexandra snickered. But she worried - Larry's technique didn't seem sloppy to her. How bad must hers be?

"Krogstad!" Shirtliffe shouted. "Do you like having pieces of your face reattached? Quit grinning and cast a Blocking Jinx! If you were half as good as you think you are you'd be twice as good as you are!"

While Ms. Shirtliffe walked around barking at the older duelers, Alexandra continued her target practice. As it began to get dark and they were about to be dismissed for the day, Ms. Shirtliffe made her way over to her.

"Did you play with toy guns as a child?" Ms. Shirtliffe asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Alexandra said, with some surprise.

"A wand is not a gun. You have the same problem most Muggle-borns do. Get those TV images out of your head. Why are your fingers so stiff?" Shirtliffe clamped a hand over Alexandra's wrist, until she loosened her hand. "You're also not nearly as good as you should be. When are you going to get over yourself and start taking instruction, Quick?"

"I'm trying, ma'am."

"Yes, I can see how you're trying not to grit your teeth at me." Shirtliffe released her wrist. "Try harder." She walked away, leaving Alexandra fuming even more. She saw Torvald smirking at her, and

Larry glowering, and was relieved when the teacher called an end to practice and sent them all inside.

Over the next week, Alexandra asked Mrs. Murphy every day for a note permitting her to start dueling again, becoming more desperate as Halloween approached. Finally, with only a week before the competition, the Healer reluctantly admitted that Alexandra showed no lingering effects from the curse or the poison, and cleared her for all activities.

It was the Friday before Halloween before the 'Alexandra Committee' was able to meet in the library again.

Alexandra and Anna were looking through descriptions of curses that could be imbued in objects while David was consulting a thick encyclopedia of poisons when the Pritchards arrived.

"Hey," David said. "Are Tweedledum and Tweedledee in detention or something, or you gonna have to look over your shoulders all evening for them?"

Constance and Forbearance were not amused. "That hain't no way to talk, David Washington."

"Those two say worse about us Mud-"

"We'uns expect *better* of you," Constance said, in a very severe tone.

That shut David up as the twins sat down.

"To talk plain, they'uns don't actually speak much 'bout any of y'all," Forbearance said.

"An' we'uns don't let 'em speak ill," Constance said.

Alexandra decided it was time to change the subject. She cast Muffliato and said, "We've been trying to guess exactly what curse and poison were used against me, but it's not easy."

"Really dangerous poisons are only described by effect. Naturally, you need a note from Mr. Grue to check out the books that list the details of the worst ones," David said.

Anna nodded. "And there are some pretty dangerous curses listed here, but all the Dark ones are in the Restricted Reserves."

"Same old story," Alexandra said. "They won't let us learn anything that might be even a little bit dangerous."

"That curse wasn't a little bit dangerous," Anna said. "Putting something that can kill you on a piece of parchment is hard. That was a sophisticated piece of Dark Arts. It's not the kind of curse you can buy in a back alley in the Goblin Market."

David leaned toward Anna. "Yeah, I've been wondering about that. Since when have you become an expert on curses? You never explained how you broke the curse on Alex."

"I didn't break it." Anna's eyes were downcast, as if she were admitting failure. "Mr. Grue said I almost killed her myself and it was pure luck that I undid a little bit of it."

"Mr. Grue would rather boil his own tongue than admit that you saved me," Alexandra said.

"You can't even take Beginning Curse-Breaking until eleventh grade," David said.

"I've been taking Arithmancy," Anna said, "and I started reading books about curse-breaking this summer." She flipped through her book again, embarrassed. "I kind of figured Alexandra might need help someday - I didn't think I'd have to actually try breaking a curse this soon."

"Damn. That's hard-core," David said.

"You're a wonder, Anna," Constance said.

"She is," Alexandra agreed. Anna blushed.

"Why are you tryin' to figger just what this warlock sent you?" Constance asked.

Forbearance nodded. "S'ppose'n you find out. How will it help you?"

"Won't likely be a name next to it," Constance said. "You won't prove nothin'."

"It's all we have to go on," Alexandra said. "Except one thing, which I've been meaning to ask you." Her eyes swept the table. "You were

there when I told Anna I was going to have Payton send letters to me through her. Did you tell anyone else about that?"

While Forbearance's mouth made a startled 'o' of surprise, Constance asked, "Why would we have mentioned it to anyone else?"

David looked confused. "Why are you asking..." His voice trailed off. "Oh."

Alexandra nodded. "Whoever sent me the owl must have known my mail was being screened."

Everyone looked at each other.

"I'm not accusing anyone," Alexandra said. "But if you happened to mention it to anyone else, you know how easy it is for word to spread."

"We know," Constance said.

"But we'uns din't say nothin' 'bout it to no one else," Forbearance said.

Anna shook her head. David shrugged - he hadn't been there when Alexandra had spoken about it.

"Well," Alexandra said, "I didn't think to hide our conversation there in the cafeteria that day. So anyone could have been listening in."

"You think someone took a potion just to eavesdrop on you -" David stopped.

"Darla used Auror's Ears to eavesdrop on me last year," Alexandra said.

"You're still thinking it's Mary," Anna said.

"I doubt she sent the owl, and I'm pretty sure she didn't curse the parchment. If she could do that, she could get me any time."

"She could be a spy," David said.

"Yes."

Anna said carefully, "Alex, you might be right, but..."

"I know, if I go accusing her without proof, I'll look like the crazy, paranoid girl, and worse, I'll be accusing the little sister of the girl everyone thinks I killed." Alexandra rubbed her eyes wearily. "Seriously, I hope it *isn't* Mary."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence after that. Then Forbearance said hesitantly, "You know, I finished work on your chart, Alex - after you was in the infirmary an' there wasn't nothin' else we'uns could do..."

Constance made a sound that was almost a groan. "You hain't gonna trot that out?"

Forbearance paused, mouth half-open for a moment, then went on as if she had not been interrupted. "Your signs was dangerous that day."

"No offense," Alexandra said, "but that's not too helpful now."

"I know that. But if I was to cast your chart for the rest of the year..."

Constance threw her hands up. "Oh, goodness, Forbearance! You can't predict when Alexandra's in danger with your star charts! You been so swoggled by this astrology foolishness..."

"If it were foolishness it wouldn't be taught here," Forbearance retorted. "And the stars were right! Alexandra was in danger!"

"She's in danger every day that some wicked warlock has a mind to kill her. She's in danger 'til we break the Geas on her! Don't need no stars to tell us that."

Alexandra interrupted them. "Forbearance, I hate to say it, but if you tell me I'm in more danger on a particular day, what am I supposed to do about it? Astrology can't tell you *how* someone's going to try to kill me, can it?"

"Well, no, not percisely," Forbearance said.

"The stars can't tell you nothin' percisely," Constance said.

"I s'ppose you think readin' them romance novels is more helpful?"

"They're for Muggle Studies," Constance said heatedly.

"Muggles think *vampires* is romantic an' you call astrology foolishness?"

"Vampires?" David said.

Constance blushed, while Alexandra and Anna sat in stunned silence. Constance and Forbearance rarely displayed anger, and never at each other.

"Is you'uns quarrelin' again?" asked a younger voice. Everyone turned quickly as Innocence came strolling up the narrow aisle to their back corner table, hands clasped behind her back, blonde hair hanging loosely around her shoulders. By Charmbridge standards, she was dressed quite conservatively, with a dark open robe over her long dress, but Constance and Forbearance never failed to frown disapprovingly when they saw her head uncovered.

"What is it, Innocence?" asked Constance.

"Is the Rashes come lookin' for us?" Forbearance asked.

"Nope." Innocence shook her head. "They'uns're still out with the winged goats."

"Then why are you here?" Constance asked crossly.

Innocence looked with interest at the chart Forbearance had unrolled on the table, and at the books lying next to Alexandra and Anna.

"Innocence," Alexandra said, "we're kind of busy. Talking about high school stuff."

"I know what you'uns're talkin' 'bout," Innocence said, "an' it hain't high school stuff."

Constance said, "Innocence, mind your manners and don't be a pest."

"What do you mean you know what we're talking about?" Alexandra asked.

Innocence ignored her sister. She spoke earnestly to Alexandra. "You're in trouble, Alex. I know you is. Constance and Forbearance been frettin' and fearin' for you ever since school started, even a'fore someone tried to murder you. You'uns are meetin' in secret 'cause you're tryin' to figger who."

Alexandra gave her a wry smile. "You're pretty smart."

Innocence beamed, and made a face at her sisters, as if to say: See? Then she turned back to Alexandra. "I wanna help."

"You helped a lot warning us about Benjamin and Mordecai."

"Aw, Alex, you could use Charlie as a lookout. I hain't no bird, I can help for real!" Her voice became wheedling. "Mr. Newton says my Charms is above my grade level, and I'm fixin' to win the seventh grade Duelin' Competition."

"Innocence, that's enough," Constance said.

"We all appreciate you wants to help," Forbearance said.

Innocence snorted. "No you don't! You'uns want me to 'mind my manners' an' 'behave' an' -"

"They want you to be safe," Alexandra said.

"If it hain't safe for me to help, it hain't safe for them neither, is it?" Innocence turned on her sisters again and folded her arms. "Ma and Pa would be just as angry at you as me - more, since I'm your li'l sister an' I hain't to be expected to know better."

Constance said, "Now you listen to me, Innocence Catharine -"

"If I oughtn't be involved, you ought not neither, an' you'uns is already disobeyin' Ma and Pa, and we *know* you hain't mindin' Benjamin an' Mordecai."

"I don't want your help," Alexandra said.

That silenced everyone. Innocence's face fell. Constance, who had half-risen from her chair, sat down slowly.

"Alex, you saved my life," Innocence said, hurt. "I'd do anythin' for you. I can keep a secret." She gave a meaningful look to her sisters again, who both pursed their lips angrily.

Alexandra felt a disturbing moment of déjà vu. She rose and put a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "I'll think about it, Innocence. Maybe there is something you can do to help. But -" she added, as Innocence's face lit up, "I don't want you interrupting us again, or threatening to blackmail Constance and Forbearance like you did Benjamin and Mordecai. If you'd do anything for me, then do what I say. Go away and leave us alone."

The look on Innocence's face made Alexandra feel horrible, but she pointed in the direction of the library's main entrance, forcing herself to remain impassive. Innocence hung her head and turned around to trudge away.

Alexandra sat down. "Now I feel like crap."

Anna said, "She's just a kid."

"Like I was, when I made Maximilian take me with him to the Lands Below."

After a long silence, David said, "Okay, don't everyone flip out, but... she does want to help."

"David Washington!" Constance said. "You best not be suggestin' that we involve Innocence?"

"The five of us, we aren't just trying to figure out who's after Alex right now. We're studying magic we'll need in the future, right? Isn't that really what the Alexandra Committee is about?"

"Do we really have to keep calling it that?" Alexandra asked.

David turned to her. "Look, Alex, you said it yourself. Max couldn't keep you from getting involved when you were a seventh grader."

"He should have," Alexandra said.

"You'd have hated him if he had, and you'd have figured out a way to get up in his business anyway," David said.

Alexandra stared at him. Aghast, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance all waited for Alexandra to speak. David's hands twitched, but he held her gaze.

Slowly, Alexandra said, "Do you really want Innocence to know what I promised the Generous Ones?"

David's brow furrowed. "Doesn't she deserve to know the truth?"

"That I promised my life in place of hers? No, I don't want her to know that. Ever."

David opened his mouth, then closed it slowly. "Okay. I see your point."

Anna said, "She'll probably keep trying to help whether we want her to or not."

"Girl is persistent," Forbearance admitted.

"Well, maybe we can find something for her to do," Alexandra said. "To make her feel included." She yawned. "I have no idea what. I don't even know what to do myself right now."

"Don't go nowhere alone," Constance said.

"And let us watch your back," Anna said.

"Are you going to taste my food for me, too?" Alexandra asked. "Never mind - don't answer that. I'll be careful, I promise." She gathered up the books she had been browsing. "I hereby call this meeting of the Alexandra Committee to an end."

Alexandra knew she hadn't fooled anyone with her flippant tone. Anna was silent as they walked back to their room.

Alexandra wasn't sure what to do about Innocence, but she didn't spend too much time thinking about the girl. Innocence was earnest, but she had a short attention span. What really bothered her was the fact that her would-be killers were still out there, waiting to try again, and there was nothing she could do about it. She even had a pretty good idea who it was, but as usual, no one would listen to her. Well, she certainly wasn't going to wait for Diana Grimm to catch the culprit. If the Special Inquisitor even cared about catching Dark Wizards other than her father. Nor was she going to rely on Dean

Grimm to protect her. Somehow, she had to flush out John Manuelito and whoever was helping him.

The Duel

Although the dueling competition was foremost in Alexandra's mind, there were plenty of other contests and games during the week leading up the Halloween weekend. The Quidditch and Quodpot teams played some sort of hybrid of the two games against each other. David entered the wizard chess competition, and there was even a Plunkballs tournament for the younger students.

Anna, Constance, and Forbearance all entered the Magical Theory essay competition, and even Alexandra participated in the Academic Magic Bowl. The Saturday morning before Halloween, the ninth graders were milling about in the hallway waiting to learn who had won various competitions and would move on to the school-wide finals when someone called Alexandra's name.

All the other freshmen were as surprised as Alexandra to see the tall black girl who approached her. Bathsheba Anderson gave her a polite smile. "Can I talk to you?"

Nonplussed, Alexandra said, "Sure."

Bathsheba looked at the other ninth graders. "Somewhere else?"

Alexandra shrugged and walked with the junior down to the end of the hallway.

"Alexandra," Bathsheba said, once they were out of earshot of the other students, "this 'wizard duel' you and Larry are planning is stupid."

"Afraid I'm going to hurt your boyfriend?"

Bathsheba eyed her with something like amusement. "No, I'm afraid he'll hurt you. I know you have a reputation for being fearless, but we both know he's better than you."

"Did he send you?"

Bathsheba put her hands on her hips. "Larry didn't send me to do anything. He'd be angry if he knew I was talking to you. I don't know why the two of you have this stupid rivalry, but it's going to end in bloodshed if you don't grow up. I've already tried talking sense to him, but he's hard-headed and proud."

Alexandra snorted.

"Listen," Bathsheba said in a more reasonable tone, "we can call this duel off if neither of you has to admit you're backing down. So how about I threaten to turn you in for being out after curfew, and I'll tell Larry that I'm not going to put up with him beating up a freshman? That way you can both blame me and save face."

"You want me to believe that you care about a Mudblood getting hurt?"

Bathsheba's face twisted in anger. "How dare you! I've never called anyone that in my life!"

Alexandra was taken aback. "I..."

"Will you agree to let it go and forget this duel or not?"

Alexandra couldn't detect any insincerity in the older girl. Perhaps Bathsheba was trying to trick her. Perhaps this was a scheme of Larry's. But regardless, her mind was already made up. "No. Sorry. And Larry's not better than me. You've never seen me duel outside the club."

"You've never seen Larry duel outside the club." Bathsheba shook her head. "Fine. I tried to warn you. Don't expect me to be there - whether you kill each other or not, I'm not getting suspended for either of you." She spun on her heel and stalked off.

Alexandra slowly walked back to her friends. Constance and Forbearance politely kept silent, despite their obvious curiosity.

Anna was more direct. "Isn't that Larry's girlfriend?"

"Yes." Alexandra knew Anna was not going to be pleased about the planned duel, but she hadn't thought of a way to bring it up yet. "Later, okay?"

Anna nodded. It was easy enough to rely on her being distracted by the Academic Bowl. A few minutes later, Dean Calvert announced the results: Alexandra, despite her score in potions identification being thrown out, had taken fourth place, just behind Thomas Klaus. But only Anna and Constance would move on to the finals. She congratulated her friends. "Go win."

Anna grinned. "See you at the dueling competition."

"Yes, we'uns'll be there, to cheer you," Forbearance said.

"You and..." Constance sighed, "Innocence."

Halloween was clear and cold. Alexandra wore her JROC uniform to the dueling competition, because Ms. Shirtliffe required it. The JROC took pride in winning most of their contests - last year was the first time in several years that a non-JROC member had won the Charmbridge championship.

Alexandra was tense and excited, but not nervous. She *enjoyed* dueling. She had ever since Maximilian had begun teaching her.

Ms. Shirtliffe announced that the dueling competition would be held indoors because it was raining.

Good, Alexandra thought. Rain would make it easier to sneak out later that night.

Most of the school crowded into the gymnasium. There were no rails or ropes around the raised wooden platform where duelers squared off. Dean Grimm sat with Vice Dean Ellis and the assistant deans in a row of chairs; other teachers stood or sat as they pleased. Students had to stand if they wanted to watch.

Alexandra suspected a lot of them were waiting to see her get trounced by Larry. *Won't you be surprised?* she thought.

She waited with the other ninth grade competitors. In a separate line, Larry and Bathsheba stood with the other eleventh graders. Larry looked entirely too cocky and confident. Bathsheba was smiling, but she didn't really seem very pleased.

The first round of dueling was by grade level. A winner from each grade would then face the winners in other grades, until there were two finalists: one from the middle school grades, and one from high school. Last year, Alexandra had won the middle school competition, and then lost to Larry. This year, she'd have to beat Larry before facing whoever won in the middle school ranks.

Sixth graders went first, and Alexandra realized that she'd been expecting to see Mary Dearborn among them. But Darla's sister was nowhere in sight among the nervous eleven- and twelve-year-olds. Alexandra searched the crowd, and finally saw Mary standing with some other sixth grade girls, in bright blue and yellow robes. She was a safe distance away from the dueling platform, a spectator only. Alexandra looked away quickly.

There were few sixth graders who knew enough magic by October to attempt dueling; with only four competitors, there were only three matches. The winner was a Radicalist witch who used a surprisingly effective Sleep Charm to drop both her opponents soundlessly to the ground.

The seventh grade competitors were more numerous. Most of the JROC was cheering for William; Alexandra felt torn between rooting for him and Innocence. She hoped one of them would be eliminated before they had to duel each other, but both of them performed quite well. William mostly relied on the same Stunning Charm that other younger duelists used, but he had improved a lot since last year; he defeated three opponents, even the one other boy (also a JROC member) who knew how to cast a Shield Charm.

Innocence fought two matches, using a Full Body-Bind Charm to paralyze one opponent and distracting another with a cloud of flies before she Stunned him. This left her and William to duel for the seventh grade title.

Constance and Forbearance had pushed themselves to the front ranks of the spectators, only a few feet from Alexandra. Constance clasped her hands. "Oh, I hope Innocence wins."

"I hain't sure I want her given the encouragement," Forbearance said.

Innocence hadn't taken losing to William very well the previous year. The stout uniformed boy looked more nervous than he had against his other opponents. The JROC cheered as he bowed. Alexandra did too, but she also applauded for Innocence.

Innocence threw a spell they'd all seen before: a Croaker. A loud croak echoed in the air, but William knew the reversal and dispelled it.

Next Innocence threw a Jelly-Legs Jinx. William's legs almost collapsed beneath him, but he immediately reversed this also.

When Innocence cast a third hex, Sonja, who was standing next to Alexandra, whispered, "He's panicking - he can't remember any counter-curses."

Alexandra didn't think so. William did look nervous, but he was defending himself too effectively to be in a panic. He finally cast a Stunning Charm, but his aim was terrible. Innocence flinched even though the red beam came nowhere near her.

"Oh, William," Alexandra muttered, as Innocence attacked him again.

After another half-hearted attempt to Stun her, William was in the middle of casting a Shield Charm when Innocence said, with very slow and careful enunciation: "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

William was immediately frozen in place, then fell over. Ms. Shirliffe declared Innocence the winner.

Innocence did not look at all triumphant as she stalked off the platform. She looked furious. Ms. Shirliffe unparalyzed William with a tap of her wand.

"I've seen you do better, Killmond," she said.

So have I, thought Alexandra.

The eighth graders duelled next. Alexandra was unsurprised when Tomo Matsuzaka won.

The middle school grades - six through eight - then pitted their winners against one another to determine the middle school champion. It was rare for a younger student to beat an older one, and Innocence, though obviously still angry and flustered, easily defeated her sixth grade opponent. When she faced Tomo, she cast only one hex. She'd barely uttered the words when a Stunner struck her in the chest. She collapsed backward; the hex she had flung was a buzzing, golden swarm. Tomo stood stock still and didn't flinch or even attempt to deflect it as it rippled past.

Ms. Shirliffe helped the dazed Ozarker to her feet. Still shaking, Innocence made a clumsy curtsy, and Tomo bowed. Innocence

stumbled down the steps to be caught by her sisters, who consoled her as the ninth graders began preparing for their matches.

Alexandra's first opponent was Sonja. Sonja dueled every year, but had stopped attending Dueling Club meetings. She winked at Alexandra, and Alexandra smiled back at her. They bowed, straightened, and Alexandra Petrified her while the other girl was still raising her wand.

"Sorry, Sonja," she said.

After that, Corey McCluskey and Thomas Klaus dueled. Corey was a Dueling Club member, and beat the shy, smaller boy easily.

There were four more duels before Alexandra had her next match, against Saul Sather. She had never dueled Saul. He wasn't a member of the Dueling Club. She'd never exchanged a word with him in her four years at Charmbridge, though occasionally she caught him looking at her as if she were a bug he was hoping someone else would step on.

With all the animosity showing on his face even before they bowed, she thought he might prove to be a serious opponent, but he wasn't. He obviously hadn't practiced dueling very much, and she Stunned him easily.

This left her and Corey to duel for the ninth grade title. She'd defeated the Druidic wizard in last year's competition. His uncertainty showed on his face, and Alexandra felt completely confident.

But he attempted something novel - he attacked her wand, rather than her, using a spell she was completely unfamiliar with. Her wand twitched and bent in her hand as Corey concentrated on his own wand, foiling her attempts to cast any spells at him. For a moment, a sense of dread overwhelmed her - she was helpless! Corey would strike her down while she held a wand that had been rendered useless.

It took her a moment to realize that Corey couldn't do anything *except* attack her wand. She felt the foreign magic disturbing the core of her own wand, but she also sensed that Corey was barely preventing her from throwing it off.

Willpower alone wasn't sufficient, not without knowing the magic Corey was using, but she concentrated, keeping one eye on her opponent. Around the dueling platform everyone watched in hushed silence at what had proven to be one of the most dramatic duels of the afternoon, for all that it was lacking in any magical pyrotechnics. Corey couldn't keep it up indefinitely, she was certain. Sure enough, there came a moment when he lifted his wand and stepped back. He pointed it at her again hoping to catch her with a Stunning Charm or a hex, but in that instant, he was no longer controlling her wand, and she blasted him off his feet.

There was a lot of cheering as Ms. Shirtliffe declared Alexandra the ninth grade champion. It wasn't just the JROC and her friends; Sonja whistled approval and Torvald grinned at her as he applauded. Tomo looked very serious as she clapped her hands together.

David and Dylan had pushed through the crowd to stand close to where the duelists lined up, and David gave her a thumbs up as she jumped off the platform.

"Now you just have to take out Larry," he said.

"Assuming he wins the eleventh grade competition." But she knew he would - it was as inevitable as her own victory. Neither she nor Larry had ever doubted for a moment that the two of them would end up facing each other.

The tenth graders were more sophisticated duelers than the ninth graders, and Alexandra wasn't sure whether to root for Torvald or for Adela Iturbide, whom she despised but would have loved to duel. Adela lost her first duel, however, and when Torvald beat Karina Knutzen, he was left facing his best friend, Stuart, for the tenth grade title.

Alexandra expected Torvald to win - after all, he was a member of the Dueling Club, and Stuart wasn't. The two boys exchanged a fierce volley of hexes, each trying to sting and burn and shock the other with little thought given to defense. It looked more like a particularly vicious game of hexem than a duel. Stuart was the first to pronounce a proper incantation without being interrupted by tufts of hair bursting out of his ears or his fingernails catching on fire.

"*Stupefy!*" he said, and struck Torvald right in the face with a Stunner. For the first time that day, Mrs. Murphy had to treat a defeated duelist.

The tension increased as the eleventh graders squared off. Larry was in the first match, pitted against Bathsheba in what Alexandra thought was an amusing irony.

Bathsheba wasn't bad, and Alexandra, who had watched Larry practice often enough and knew what he was capable of, could tell that he was holding back. But only a little. He might not want to hurt his girlfriend, but he wasn't going to let her beat him. After they exchanged a few hexes, Larry iced the platform at her feet, then hurled her back with a magical push. Bathsheba couldn't resist the charm pushing against her and keep her balance at the same time, and she fell.

Larry held his wand pointed at her. Technically, a duel wasn't over until a duelist was either disarmed, incapacitated, or had surrendered, but courtesy required allowing someone at a disadvantage to yield before hexing them again. Bathsheba surrendered. Alexandra was a little disappointed.

Most of the remaining eleventh grade duelers were in the JROC. Supriya Chandra and Charlotte Barker both defeated their opponents, then they and Larry each won their second matches. This left the three of them to duel for the eleventh grade title. Ms. Shirtliffe chose the first pair randomly. Alexandra was hoping Larry would have to fight both Charlotte and Supriya, but to her disappointment, the two JROC witches had to duel each other first.

Supriya and Charlotte were both skilled, and they knew each other well. They were friends, so they observed every courtesy and exchanged spells and counter-spells in a formal manner, showing off their skill and finesse and provoking Larry to roll his eyes impatiently. Charlotte eventually succeeded in Disarming Supriya.

Alexandra knew what the outcome of the final match would be before it started. Charlotte had tried to hide her best techniques during her preceding duels, and she attacked Larry with an aggressiveness that might have deceived the spectators who'd only been watching her today. But Larry also knew Charlotte from dueling her in the club. He didn't hold back as he had with Bathsheba, and their duel was brief. There were flashes and sparks and flames, and

then Larry said, "*Caedarus!*" and Charlotte went spinning off the platform, almost landing in the front row of deans.

Mrs. Murphy and Dean Cervantes helped her to her feet, with Mrs. Murphy tilting her head back to stem the flow of blood. She put a wand to Charlotte's crushed nose, and said, "*Episkey.*"

Larry stepped off the platform and folded his arms, waiting for the twelfth grade matches to begin. Across the platform, his eyes met Alexandra's, and his mouth curled into an arrogant smile. She stared flatly back at him, and they spent most of the next twenty minutes trying to stare each other down, even as the seniors dueled. Daniel Keedle won, but that was immaterial to Alexandra - she'd be dueling Larry before she faced Daniel.

The first inter-grade high school match was Alexandra against Stuart Cortlandt.

Stuart was a pureblood from a respected New Colonial wizarding family, or so Alexandra had heard. He was far more handsome than his roommate, with a pleasant face beneath tousled blond hair, and while he was good-natured like Torvald, he was quieter and more dignified.

She was rather surprised that he'd turned out to be the tenth grade champion, and since she'd only been able to observe him in a few matches, she wasn't familiar with his style of dueling.

The two of them took up positions, and when Ms. Shirliffe signaled the start of the duel, Alexandra immediately cast a Disarming Spell.

Stuart blocked it and quickly flung a hex at her face. He whipped several more hexes at her, using the same speed and energy he'd used in his duel with Torvald.

None of the hexes were powerful ones, Alexandra realized, and she braced herself and pointed her wand straight at him. Tiny fireballs struck her and she winced, and a ghostly hand slapped her hard across the face, bringing tears to her eyes, but her Stunning Charm blasted right through Stuart's Shield Charm, which he cast too late, and he crumpled to the ground.

Alexandra squatted and slapped at her arms and legs where wisps of smoke were curling from burnt holes in her clothing. Her face felt swollen.

Mrs. Murphy examined her and applied another healing spell to her face, before proclaiming her fit to continue dueling.

This was the disadvantage of being younger, she thought, and perhaps another reason why older students usually won the dueling competition. Larry was fresher than her, and Daniel Keedle would be more rested than either of them. But that was just the way the rules worked. She stepped onto the platform again, to face the opponent everyone here had come to see her fight.

She and Larry Albo could have been statues. Her wand angled toward him; his pointed just above the extended, invisible line extending from the end of hers. They were feeling each other out even before the duel began, like fencers. There was a way of knowing what your opponent was doing, of *feeling* the magic in your wand's core and his. Ms. Shirliffe said that was superstition, something duelists told themselves to make themselves believe they could anticipate more than they could, but Alexandra believed she could feel it sometimes, and she was pretty sure from the way Larry was standing and holding his wand that he did, too.

Ms. Shirliffe's wand cut the air. Alexandra was going to Disarm Larry. Starting the duel with a Disarming Charm rarely worked. Someone ready for an attack was much harder to disarm, but by keeping her wrist straight and timing the second syllable - "*Ex-pell-i-arm-us*" - with the secondary accent - so that it fell just as her opponent was about to cast a spell, Alexandra had won duels even against opponents who'd seen her use that trick before.

She was going to cast a Disarming Charm, but she didn't. She cast a Shield Charm instead. Larry's Caedarus Spell, which he knew how to cast so that his wand was still at his side while he began the incantation and he only lifted it at the last possible instant, just as the last bit of the word left his tongue, would have beat her Expelliarmus. He had known what she was going to do.

The solid sphere of light shivered and dissolved against her Shield Charm.

He didn't repeat his attack. Her Shield Charm kept her from counter-attacking, and he waited. Out of the corner of her eye, Alexandra saw Ms. Shirliffe nodding with approval. She was always telling Alexandra that she attacked too eagerly and didn't defend herself enough.

Larry said, "*Levicorpus!*" as Alexandra dropped her Shield Charm and cast a Stunning Charm with the same motion of her wand. Her Stunner would have hit him if not for the sudden jerk on her feet, but he couldn't concentrate on yanking her upward while he was evading it. She allowed herself to hit the wooden platform hard with her arms extended in front of her, clutching her wand in both hands, and she thought she'd get him, but he blocked her hex and while she was rolling and casting another Shield Charm, he said, "*Serpensortia!*"

She rolled onto a long, green snake that immediately hissed and bit her.

Dirty trick, she thought. Mr. Grue would have to give her anti-venom. Larry might get points for that spell - it was difficult, and a favorite of traditionalists - but no snake venom took effect immediately. That's why it was allowed in duels, even though Muggles would consider throwing a venomous snake at someone a deadly attack.

Larry didn't think he was going to win that way. He'd just done it to annoy and discomfit her.

"*Caedarus!*" Larry said, with perfect timing as Alexandra rose, and a ball of light smacked her in the face hard enough to flip her backward head over heels. She landed on her back, her head struck the boards, and the angry serpent struck her a second time. She was too dazed to notice anything but a little sting, while blood spurted out of her nose. Larry had hit her with the same spell he'd opened the duel with, the same spell he'd used to beat Charlotte. She felt like an idiot. How had she lost?

"There's really no reason to feel badly," Mrs. Murphy told her in the infirmary afterward. "Mr. Albo is two years older than you, after all."

The nurse held the cloth she'd used to wipe the remaining blood off of Alexandra's face over a waste basket and incinerated it with a wave of her wand.

Back in the gymnasium, Mr. Grue had made her lie on the ground in full view of everyone while he took his time extracting vials from the pockets in his long, black, wool robe to mix and imbue an anti-venom solution. She hated feeling vulnerable and helpless. Her arm and shoulder where the snake had bitten her felt numb, and the rest of her body was breaking into a sweat and her heartbeat was skipping erratically before the Potions teacher finally held a vial to her lips and told her to drink. She wondered if he'd done something special just to make it taste awful as well. Poor Anna looked as if she'd been the one bitten, she was so pale.

After drinking the antidote, Alexandra walked to the infirmary with help from Anna and Charlotte, dizzy and dripping blood all the way because she refused to be levitated there.

Mrs. Murphy held out a cup. "Drink this blood replenishing potion. It will flush out the last of the venom, but it will take twenty-four hours."

Alexandra drank it. Surprisingly, it didn't taste nasty. It had a slight metallic flavor, but was otherwise watery and bland. "So can I go now? This was just a routine dueling injury, easy to fix, right?"

"I wish you children wouldn't take it for granted that anything you do to each other can be patched up - that's not always true. But yes, you can go."

Alexandra walked into the hallway, fighting off the lingering dizziness. Her friends were waiting outside, along with Torvald and several members of the JROC. Torvald and Charlotte were the most sympathetic. Charlotte took hold of Alexandra's collar and shook her head. "A Cleaning Charm won't get all the blood out," she said, waving her wand over the dark stain on the front of Alexandra's blue JROC jacket, "but the house-elves should be able to get the rest."

"You did really well, Alex," Anna said.

Innocence said, "You was spectacular!"

"Hain't no shame in bein' humbled a bit," said Constance.

"I lost," Alexandra said. All of her friends' consoling words couldn't change that.

"Well, if you're going to lose, lose spectacularly," Torvald said. "That was some backflip - I felt you land from across the gym. And getting bit twice, that was a bonus."

"Thanks, Torvald. Would you like to rub it in some more?"

"Seriously, Troublesome, the odds against you were three-to-one."

"That high?" Alexandra was stung.

David nodded. "I lost two eagles on you."

"Wait a minute - you bet on me?"

"Well, I admit, it seems kind of stupid now."

Constance and Forbearance looked scandalized. "Gamblin'! On duels?"

"So, how did the rest of the duels go?" Alexandra asked.

There was an awkward silence. Charlotte was the one who answered. "Larry won. If it's any comfort, Daniel lost faster than you did. And that poor eighth grader didn't have a chance. She tried, though."

"So Larry is Charmbridge Dueling Champion for the second year in a row."

"I'm afraid so." Charlotte clapped Alexandra on the shoulder. "One of us will get him next year. C'mon, I know it sucks to lose, but brighten up, Witch-Private! You're just a freshman and you did better than most of the seniors. You should be proud."

"When isn't she proud?" asked a voice from down the hall. "It's that big head of hers that made her think she had a chance against me in the first place."

Everyone turned. Larry was wearing a smug, triumphant expression.

"Buzz off, Albo," David said.

"You're sure mouthy when you're surrounded by people who will keep you out of trouble," Larry said, as David tensed. "Go ahead, pretend like you're going to jump me so your friends can hold you back."

"All right, knock it off, Larry." Charlotte stepped between Larry and Alexandra and her friends. "You won. Congratulations. You don't have to be a pig about it."

Larry colored a little, but he said, "I didn't know Troublesome had her own personal retinue." He looked over Charlotte's shoulder. "I want to talk to you, Quick."

"Later," Alexandra said. What the hell did he want? Did he think she was going to chicken out of their duel that night?

Larry sighed loudly. "I swear, I'm not here to cause trouble or start a fight." He made an elaborate, sweeping bow and spoke in a voice that dripped condescension. "May I *please* speak to you, Miss Quick, without your friends around? If you're afraid of me, you can have them stand guard down the hall."

Alexandra made a disgusted sound, then pushed through the group toward him. "Whatever." She turned back to her friends. "I'll see you at dinner, okay? Thanks, everyone - I really appreciate you cheering for me. And Charlotte, Anna, thanks for bringing me to the infirmary." She looked at Anna. 'Don't worry,' she mouthed silently. She smiled at the rest, who reluctantly let her walk away with Larry, down the hall away from the infirmary and in the general direction of the main corridor.

"Congratulations," she said in a flat voice.

"Thank you." Larry sounded perfectly pleased with himself.

"You know in a wizard duel I would have banished that snake and taken out your knees which you couldn't have protected while I was on the ground."

"In a wizard duel, you wouldn't have moved after you hit the ground."

"We'll find out, won't we? This afternoon was just for a stupid trophy - tonight is the real thing. So you've had your little moment. Are you

done gloating? I'm hungry and I don't want to miss the Halloween feast."

She turned away from him, and Larry said, "Wait," in a tone that made her pause. She turned around slowly.

Larry took a deep breath. He looked vexed.

"Bathsheba is riding me about our duel," he said. "She doesn't like it, and beating you up twice is frankly not worth an angry girlfriend." He folded his arms, looked down at the floor as he scuffed at it with his shoe, then looked up at her with a flat expression. "I'm satisfied with beating you this afternoon. If you want to walk away, we can call off our duel tonight. I give you my word I won't say anything about it to anyone else. No one has to know. One-time offer."

Alexandra met his flat gaze with her own. Anna would have said that her answer was inevitable, but she really did think it over. She knew breaking curfew to duel Larry in the woods was foolish, and that Anna would have an opinion much like Bathsheba's.

She still thought she could beat Larry in a real duel. But when he was actually acting - for a moment - *almost* human, the attraction wasn't quite as compelling as when all she could think of was wiping the smirk off his face.

Briefly, it occurred to her that maybe Larry was actually afraid to duel her. Maybe he knew, deep down, that he'd lose a real duel. But no, she thought, as she studied his face. He was too arrogant to think he'd lose.

He probably would keep his word, but *he* would know. They would both know, forever afterward, that she'd backed down.

"No," she said.

He continued staring at her for several seconds. Then he smiled, as if this was what he'd been hoping for.

"Well, I can tell Bathsheba I tried," he said, "when I see her tonight after trouncing you."

"Hope she's good at healing charms." Alexandra gave him a narrow smile that she hoped looked confident and certain of herself, and walked away.

"You're crazy," Anna said flatly.

"Crazy!" Charlie repeated.

Alexandra had waited until after dinner and they were back in their room to tell her, reasoning that Anna would have less recourse to try to talk her out of it while she was already putting her cloak on.

"I'm going to beat him, Anna. I know I lost the Dueling Competition, but trust me, wizard-dueling is different -"

"WHO CARES ABOUT THE DUEL?" Anna shouted. Alexandra stopped putting on her cloak and stared at her friend. Charlie flapped about the room, startled. Anna's voice was loud enough to be heard in the next room - and probably in the adjacent rooms as well. "This stupid duel is just the kind of stupid thing I'd expect you two stupid idiots to do, but that's not the stupid part!"

"Anna, please." Alexandra held her hands out pleadingly, trying to quiet her. She looked nervously at the door to the bathroom.

Anna barely lowered her voice. "Have you forgotten that someone is trying to *kill* you?"

"Well, no..."

"But you're going to go *into the woods* after dark like an idiot just so you can duel Larry Albo!"

Alexandra paused. When Anna put it that way, it did sound kind of... stupid.

Anna laughed incredulously. "You actually didn't think about that, did you?"

"Sure I did." Alexandra tried to think of something else to say. "I'll have Charlie with me -"

"Crazy!" Charlie said.

Anna pressed her hands to her face. "I know I'm not going to talk you out of this. So I'm coming along. I think we should bring Constance and Forbearance, too, and David if we can find him."

"Great, let's sneak into the woods with as many people as possible."

"Fine. Just me, but I'm going to send Jingwei to Constance and Forbearance's room to tell them where we're going so if we don't return by midnight, they should go tell someone."

"You're being dramatic. Of course we'll be back by midnight."

"And I suppose you've considered what will happen if you and Larry hurt each other in this wizard-duel and have to go to the infirmary this late?"

"Anna, if I beat him, Larry will *leave me alone* for the rest of the time he's at Charmbridge! And you, too."

"He'd leave us alone if you'd let it go!"

"What? Do you think I'm the one always starting things with him?"

Anna hesitated. "Well, no. But still - this is a stupid, bad idea and you know it."

Alexandra slowly slid her cloak off her shoulders and dropped it on her bed. "Okay, Anna. If you tell me not to go, I won't."

The two of them stood there silently facing each other. Charlie didn't make a sound.

Then Anna said, "You'll stay here? Just not show up at the duel?"

"Yes."

"And Larry will spread it all over school that you chickened out."

"Probably."

Anna bit her lip. "That's not fair, Alex. You can't make me responsible."

"What do you want me to do, Anna?"

Anna closed her eyes. After taking a deep breath, she opened them again and turned to her desk. "Let's go. Just let me write a note first and run upstairs to the aviary."

They didn't say much as they left the academy. Anna wasn't as accustomed to sneaking out as Alexandra. She looked around nervously, expecting to be caught at any moment.

The rain was coming down in a steady drizzle. They didn't get far from the academy building before it was just a blurry light behind them. Once they were halfway to the trees, Anna said, "The wizard-dueling you did with Maximilian and Martin and Beatrice still wasn't real dueling. They weren't trying to kill you."

"Larry isn't going to try to kill me."

"What if Larry *is* the one trying to kill you?"

Alexandra thought about that. Then she shook her head. "No. He doesn't want to kill me. He just wants to humiliate me."

Charlie suddenly caved in alarm and flew away from Alexandra's shoulder. Alexandra scanned the shadows around them, holding her wand out, but Anna said, "It's just Jingwei."

The great horned owl hooted as it swept by Anna's head then glided on toward the shadowy tree line.

"Charlie's smart, but Jingwei can bite someone's nose off. And she won't run away from other owls," Anna said.

Alexandra smiled. "Charlie will keep an eye out from above." Though with the rain coming down the way it was, Charlie wouldn't be able to see much either.

Alexandra cast a spell to detect alarms or wards at the edge of the treeline. She didn't find any. The two of them crept cautiously forward. Anna wanted to light her wand, but Alexandra stopped her. "It'll ruin our night vision."

"What night vision?" Anna muttered. "I can't see anything."

Their feet squelched in the wet, cold dirt and leaves. Alexandra's weather-proof cloak kept most of the rain off, and Anna's did the

same. Alexandra wished she could cast an Umbrella Charm, but that would create a visible glow too.

They found their way to the same clearing in which Alexandra and Anna had encountered Larry and his friends three years earlier. Alexandra expected Larry to be waiting for them. He wasn't.

"Are you sure he's not setting you up again?" Anna asked.

Alexandra peered around suspiciously. With a chill, she spotted a dark shape lying in a heap on the ground. She stepped over to it and knelt, and put her hand on the warm, still form. Then with horror, she saw a much smaller form lying next to the cloaked figure - a black owl.

She stood quickly. "Anna! Get out of here!"

"What?" Anna gasped and then cast a Light Spell. She squealed when she saw Larry lying on the ground at Alexandra's feet.

"Go!" Alexandra said.

"Not without you!" The whites of Anna's eyes were all Alexandra could see in her wandlight; Anna was looking in all directions, jumping at every hoot and breeze, but Alexandra's eyes fixed on a small figure stepping out of the trees.

"You," she said, pointing her wand.

Mary Dearborn trembled as she held a light golden wand extended toward Alexandra. Her other hand clutched a glossy wand of mistletoe.

Vengeance

Beneath a dark cloak, Mary Dearborn was still wearing her blue and yellow robes, but they were soaking wet now. The younger girl's cloak evidently did not have a weather-proof charm; she was drenched and shivering.

"I told you to keep this between you and me," Alexandra said.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone else," Mary said. "He wouldn't leave."

Alexandra watched the tip of Mary's wand. "Larry came with you?"

"No. I was waiting for you - I was hoping you'd get here first."

"Alex," Anna said in a tight voice.

A screech caused Mary to jerk her wand away from Alexandra. She screamed as an owl hurtled out of the sky at her. She tumbled to the ground. Jingwei launched herself back into the air and circled around.

Alexandra yelled, "Anna, call Jingwei off!"

"What?" Anna exclaimed.

Alexandra strode over to Mary, who sprang back to her feet with surprising speed. She pressed the hand clutching the mistletoe wand to her face where Jingwei had slashed her, while she pointed the other wand at Alexandra.

In the darkness and the rain, Alexandra could see blood running down Mary's face. The girl's eyes were dark and glittering as she said, "Stay right there or I'll kill you."

"Will you?" Alexandra's voice turned cold and hard. "Go ahead and try. But if you point your wand anywhere else, I'll strike you down."

Mary's eyes widened and her wand trembled. "Like you struck down my sister?"

"What did you do to Larry?"

"I... I told him to go away. I said / wanted to duel you. He laughed at me. Then he told me to go inside. He wouldn't leave. So I... cursed him."

Alexandra would have laughed if the situation weren't so unfunny. "You used that mistletoe wand?"

Behind her, Larry's groan was almost drowned out by the patter of rain. Alexandra called to Anna: "Anna, can you take Larry back inside?"

"What, carry him?" Anna's voice was like a taut wire about to break. "You know my Levitation Spell isn't that good. And I'm not leaving you here!"

Alexandra stared at the girl in front of her. "So what's the plan, Mary?"

Mary swallowed. "You have to pay. You have to pay for killing Darla."

Alexandra heard Anna move, and she said, "Stay back, Anna."

"Alex -"

"Stay there!" The bark of her command made even Mary jump.

She heard flapping, and said in a more normal tone of voice, "Charlie, stay away."

Mary's eyes darted upward, then behind Alexandra to where Anna stood.

"Forget her, Mary," Alexandra said. "This is between you and me." And turning her head only slightly, without taking her eyes off of Mary, she said, "Anna, trust me. No matter what. This is between Mary and me."

Mary lowered the hand holding the mistletoe wand. There was a long gash across her cheek, oozing blood that looked black in the darkness, turning the side of her face dark and glistening.

"You killed Darla," she said. She was trembling more violently.

Alexandra shook her head. "No matter how many times you say that, it's not true."

"You're a liar!" Mary shouted.

"How do you know? You weren't there."

Mary glared at her silently.

"Did you set that murder of crows on me, and send me the cursed letter?" Alexandra asked.

"I would have," Mary said fiercely, "if I could."

"So who did?"

Mary didn't answer.

"It was John, wasn't it? John Manuelito."

Mary's eyes widened.

"Is he here?" Suddenly Alexandra's nerves prickled like ice. If Mary had lured her out here to face John, they were all in serious danger.

"No," Mary said. "He went back to the Indian Territories. He said we failed. He said / failed. He wasn't going to help me anymore..." She sniffed, and the tip of her wand bobbed up and down.

Larry groaned again. Anna said, "Alex, what are we going to do?"

"What are we going to do, Mary?" Alexandra asked. "You didn't really think you could duel me, did you? Do you want to hit me with that mistletoe wand? Will that make you feel better?"

Mary clenched her teeth. "I want to kill you."

Anna uttered a desperate sound, like a moan, and Larry mumbled something.

Alexandra kept her eyes on Mary. "How do you plan to kill me?"

Mary whispered, "I know the Killing Curse."

Alexandra didn't move.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Mary jabbed her wand at Alexandra. "I... I practiced over the summer. I finally made it work..." Her voice choked. Tears spilled out of her eyes. "It worked on grasshoppers, and fish."

Alexandra said, "People are different."

Mary's voice gained strength. "I know. You have to really *want* to kill a person."

"Is that really what you want? To be a murderer?"

Mary's mouth opened, but it took her several seconds to respond, with considerably less conviction than before. "For Darla."

Alexandra's eyes never left Mary's. They stood facing each other, wands at the ready, for a moment that seemed to go on and on. No one moved, and even Larry was silent. There was only the sound of the rain pouring down on everyone.

Finally, Alexandra said, "Okay." She slowly held out her wand. Mary's grip on her wand tightened.

Alexandra opened her hand, letting her wand fall to the ground.

Anna cried out behind her. Mary's eyes followed the wand, then moved back to Alexandra's face. She gulped. "You don't think I'll do it, do you?"

"I think you might. But you don't really want to. And it won't bring Darla back."

Mary made another choking sound.

"Darla didn't want to hurt anyone either," Alexandra said.

"She'd want me to avenge her!"

"I don't think so." Alexandra lowered her voice so that Mary had to concentrate to hear her. "I think she'd want you to live, more than anything else. Not destroy your life like this."

"What do you know?" Mary shouted.

"I know she'd have done anything to protect you. What do *you* know?"

Mary looked at her numbly.

"You don't know anything, do you?" Alexandra said. "Except what John told you. He lied to Darla. He lied to you, too."

Mary squeezed her eyes into slits and steadied her wand.

"Do it, then," Alexandra said.

Mary gulped a great breath of air. The rain was beating against them both, and blood was still pouring down her face from the slash Jingwei had inflicted.

"Do you remember the words?" Alexandra stepped closer, until the tip of Mary's wand almost touched her chest. "It's '*Avada Kedavra*'."

Anna gasped, "No!" in a high-pitched, terrified voice.

Mary opened her mouth, but the deadly words didn't come out. She made a keening sound as her face crumpled. Alexandra didn't say anything and didn't move.

"Aaaaow," Larry moaned. "Whaz?"

"Are you planning to kill them, too?" Alexandra asked. "Or just run off into the woods after killing me? What are you going to do then, join the Dark Convention?"

"Shut up!" Mary's face had melted into misery and despair. Her arm drooped, as if her wand had become too heavy to hold. "It's your fault! It's your fault Darla is dead!" She sank to her knees. "I miss Darla! I want her back!" Her hand fell to her side, so the tip of her wand rested in the mud inches from Alexandra's. She began sobbing.

The rain continued to fall on them. Alexandra's head was unprotected by her cloak. Her hair was plastered to her head and water was running down her neck. Mary was a bedraggled little thing, a bright splash of color shivering pathetically at her feet.

Alexandra stooped over, slowly, and picked up both her own wand and the mistletoe wand Mary had dropped.

"Come on," she said. "We're going back inside."

"Merlin... it hurts," Larry gasped. He had one arm slung over Alexandra's shoulder and one arm slung over Anna's. He was having trouble walking and the two girls were practically dragging him across the lawn. Anna had barely said a word.

Mary trudged along ahead of them, mechanically, her eyes fixed on the ground. Jingwei glided in a slow circle around the group. Alexandra had sent Charlie ahead to warn them if anyone was lingering near the academy.

"We're almost to the school," Alexandra said. "I told you I could levitate you."

"Hell no," Larry said. "You're in so much trouble... you know that, right?" Then he stiffened, and Alexandra and Anna almost stumbled and dropped him in the grass. "Corwin!" he cried. "Where's Corwin?"

"I've got him, dumbass. Stop making it harder for us to carry you." Alexandra was cradling Larry's owl in her arms. She didn't know how badly it was hurt - she knew firsthand that the curse of a mistletoe wand could be felt through a familiar by its owner, but she didn't know what happened when it went in the other direction.

Larry mumbled, "Is he... all right?"

"He's alive." That was all she could tell him. She could feel the owl's tiny heartbeat, but it had barely moved since she'd picked it up.

Through the gray haze of rain, Charmbridge Academy was like a light seen through pebbled glass. They reached an entrance, and Alexandra told Mary to open the door.

Mary hesitated, then reached obediently for the door, moving like a Clockwork with worn gears.

Larry muttered, "Little bitch... cursed me."

"Shut up, Larry." Alexandra and Anna wrestled him through the door, looking down the hallway to see if anyone was around. They closed the door quickly, leaving Jingwei and Charlie out in the rain.

Alexandra felt bad about that, but the birds would cope with the weather.

Mary immediately slid to the floor with her back against one wall and covered her face with her hands.

Alexandra and Anna gently lowered Larry to the floor, leaning against the opposite wall. Alexandra crouched next to him. "You don't look as bad as Sonja did when Darla cursed her."

Larry's eyes were glazed over, but they still flashed with anger. "Do you think - *ungh!* - this is a joke?"

"No. You have to go to the infirmary. Mrs. Murphy will know how to treat you. What are you going to tell her?"

"What?" Larry looked at her in disbelief. "I'm going to tell her she -" He pointed at Mary.

"She's just a dumb kid, Larry. She wanted to curse me with the mistletoe wand because she blames me for Darla's death. If you turn her in, Dean Grimm will probably expel her, and she'll be lucky not to get taken away from her family, thanks to the WODAMND Act."

Mary lifted her head, sniffing. Anna remained silent, but she was obviously seething with unspoken words.

Larry coughed. "So? She should go to Eerie Island, like you!"

"All right." Alexandra held the mistletoe wand in front of his nose. "Then tell Mrs. Murphy I did it."

"What?" Anna exclaimed.

"You're insane," Larry said. "And I don't believe you'd take the blame for someone else's curse."

"Then tell Mrs. Murphy you were out dueling with your friends and someone got you good with a curse," Alexandra said. "You know Mrs. Murphy doesn't ask too many questions as long as there's no serious injury. Even if she suspects one of your friends used a mistletoe wand on you, you can say you won't snitch. She'll just give you a lecture, because the Dean doesn't like the WJD getting involved at Charmbridge."

"Why the hell..." Larry pressed a hand to his chest and gulped. "Why would I say that? Why would I cover for any of you?"

"Because you won our duel," Alexandra said in a flat voice.

"What?" Larry and Anna gasped together.

"You won," Alexandra said. "I went out to the woods to duel you, and you beat me. That means I have to keep the terms we agreed to." Her face was as expressionless as her voice.

"You're crazy," Larry said. "I could have you expelled -"

"Probably not. Dean Grimm will uncover the whole truth if she really starts digging. You could have Mary expelled, but you and I will probably just get detention. Maybe probation. What do you care about Mary, besides that she got you by surprise? And if you do turn her in, everyone will know a sixth grade girl dropped the Charmbridge Dueling Champion. Pretty embarrassing, if you ask me."

Larry's eyes were wide with incredulity. Mary still had her arms resting on her knees, but she was watching Alexandra and Larry.

Alexandra lifted Corwin gently in her other arm, and handed the owl to Larry. "You can have Mary, or you can have me. You decide." She looked at Anna. "Can you get him to the infirmary? I think he can walk, with your help."

Anna opened her mouth and looked as if she wanted to protest, but couldn't get any words out.

"I don't get it." Larry's voice faltered, as he looked down at his familiar. Corwin fluttered his wings and made a soft sound.

Alexandra shrugged and stood up. She faced Anna.

Please, she mouthed soundlessly.

"What about her?" Anna whispered, tilting her head toward Mary.

"I'll deal with her. We'll talk later." Alexandra took Anna's hands. "Please," she whispered.

Anna swallowed and nodded, though Alexandra knew that she didn't understand or approve.

Alexandra grabbed Larry's arm and helped him to his feet. He was wracked with tremors and his arms and legs twitched, but he tried to walk without assistance. He wasn't successful, and Anna half-walked, half-stumbled down the hall with the taller boy leaning against her, one arm around her and the other cradling his owl.

Mary looked up at Alexandra, shivering. She was a bedraggled mess. Her black hair was like a tangle of wet grass sticking to her face. Her cloak and robes were muddy and plastered with leaves. The side of her face was covered with blood, and a lot of it had dripped onto her cloak as well. Fresh red blood was still oozing out of the cut where Jingwei had torn open her cheek. Alexandra squatted and examined it. The gash was deeper than it had first appeared.

"What are you going to do with me?" Mary asked.

"This cut is going to scar. Mrs. Murphy might be able to fix it, but I'm not sure."

Mary flinched, as if she'd only noticed the pain of the cut once Alexandra mentioned it.

"I can move it somewhere else," Alexandra said. "It will still hurt, but it will be less visible. Would you prefer a scar on your arm or your leg?"

Mary blinked, and her eyes lost a little of their glassiness. "My... my arm?"

"Okay. Hold still. The pain is going to move along with the wound."

Alexandra moved her wand widdershins around the cut and cast a Wound-Relocating Charm. Mary winced and clutched her left arm; blood immediately began soaking through her sleeve. Alexandra wiped away the blood from Mary's now-unmarked face. She pulled Mary's sleeve down and cast one of the small healing charms Maximilian had taught her to stop bleeding. Next she stood up, and pointing her wand at the girl, said, "*Exaresco*." Steam billowed away. Alexandra had to cast the spell twice before Mary was dry, leaving her still covered with dirt and leaves.

Mary looked down at herself, then up at Alexandra.

"Aren't you going to curse me?" she asked.

"Why would I do that?"

Mary's head dropped again.

Alexandra sat down next to her.

"I'll make you a deal," she said. "You tell me about John Manuelito. Everything, from the moment you first heard his name until tonight." She turned her head to look into the other girl's eyes. "And I'll tell you about Darla."

A year ago, the summer before Darla Dearborn started eighth grade, she had sworn her little sister to secrecy.

"Mother and Father wouldn't understand," she told Mary. "You know how they are. Especially after what Hilary did."

Mary had nodded solemnly, though she didn't really understand. Of course she knew how upset their parents had been when their eldest daughter had eloped with a Muggle-born boy. And Hilary hadn't just eloped - she and her new husband had formally unregistered themselves from the Confederation Census, declaring themselves no longer part of the wizarding world.

James Constantine and Mildred Gavriella Dearborn whispered about scandals and the judgment of Chicago's pureblood society, but Darla and Mary were most upset that their oldest sister had gone and gotten married without even inviting them to the wedding.

Darla had been acting dark and moody ever since she came home from her second year at Charmbridge. Mary didn't know exactly what had happened, but Darla had gotten in big trouble at school. Mary had been secretly delighted that Darla would have to stay home and go to a day school. She adored her big sister and had tried to copy everything she did for as long as she could remember, and now Darla was spending extra time with her, letting her borrow her clothes and lavishing her with attention.

But gradually Mary realized that Darla was exchanging owls with someone in secret, and even sneaking out of their mansion late at night. Mary suspected a boyfriend, and worried that Darla might elope too, leaving her all alone with their angry, disappointed parents. She even thought about telling their parents, but knew Darla would never forgive her if she did that.

Then their father and their Uncle Gideon, whom everyone else knew as Congressman Gideon Titus Dearborn, did something to permit Darla to return to Charmbridge Academy for eighth grade, and so Darla had gone off to school again.

Mary saw Darla three more times after that: when she came home for Thanksgiving, winter, and spring break. Each time, Darla seemed more pale and anxious; even her parents realized something was wrong. But none of them knew what it was.

Darla wanted to spend practically every moment with Mary on her final visit over the spring break.

"She gave me a present, before she went back to school," Mary said. Her voice was choked with tears, but she had spoken at length, and Alexandra had listened quietly without interrupting.

Mary fished around in her pockets, and produced a clear glass sphere. She held it up, and red mist appeared in its center, gradually forming a solid shape. Alexandra swallowed as she saw Darla's face, smiling gaily.

"She said it was so I'd never forget her face... so I could remember her forever." Mary closed her eyes, and her shoulders shook. "I didn't know I'd never see her again!"

Alexandra closed her own eyes, and waited.

An Auror from the Wizard Justice Department had been the one to deliver the news to Darla's parents. By the time Mary came home from her private elementary school, the Auror had come and gone, and it was Dean Grimm herself paying a condolence call to the Dearborn residence. Mr. and Mrs. Dearborn were grief-stricken and in shock, and Mary had known - she had just known - as soon as she saw the icy woman standing in their living room that Darla was dead, even before she took in her mother's red eyes, her father's ashen face, and the screaming of Nat upstairs.

"Nat?" Alexandra had not interrupted until now.

"Our house-elf. He - helped Darla. We only found that out afterward."

Alexandra started to say, "I know," but instead asked, "Is he all right? What happened to him?"

Mary looked at her strangely, the first time she'd looked directly at Alexandra since beginning her tale. "He misses Darla almost as much as I do." She narrowed her eyes. "He was the one who told me it was your fault Darla died."

I promised Nat I'd save her, Alexandra thought.

She had saved Darla from the Lands Below, and from damning herself with a pact with the Generous Ones. But she hadn't been able to save Darla in the end, and she supposed to Nat it made no difference how and why she had failed. She had promised to save 'his Darla,' yet Darla was dead.

"How did John Manuelito come into this?" she asked. "Did Darla ever tell you who her... boyfriend was?"

"No." Mary put the glass sphere back into her pocket and took a deep breath, then resumed her story.

She hadn't been told the circumstances of Darla's death. She heard the rumors, that Darla was involved in 'Dark' activities, which she didn't believe until Hilary returned for Darla's funeral and took her youngest sister aside during one of the brief moments they had away from their parents' eyes. Hilary told Mary that Darla had gotten mixed up with some bad people who'd led her into Dark Arts - the same path Hilary had taken when she was at school. Hilary had eventually broken away from that coven, but she hadn't warned Darla about it, and she blamed herself. She made Mary promise not to ever become mixed up in Dark Arts, and also to let her know if she ever wanted to run away from home. Mary hadn't seen Hilary since, though her sister sent letters occasionally which came in Muggle envelopes with Muggle postage stamps on them.

Even before Darla's funeral, Mary had heard of Alexandra Quick. She knew Alexandra was one of Darla's classmates, and the daughter of a famous Dark Wizard, and the Dearborns didn't

approve of her being at Charmbridge with their daughter. Darla herself hadn't talked about her very much.

But after the funeral, Mary heard Alexandra's name mentioned (or whispered) more often. And it was Nat who told her that he'd been at Charmbridge just before Darla died, and that Alexandra had been there, too.

"He said you promised to save her, but you came out of the basements alive and Darla didn't."

"That's true," Alexandra said, "but finish telling me about John and then I'll tell you the rest."

"He sent me an owl right before Darla's funeral. It was a really long letter, about how he'd been close to Darla and taken care of her while he was in school, before you got him expelled. He said he knew a lot of things my parents didn't know or wouldn't tell me, and that he could tell me what happened to Darla. But he was worried about getting in trouble, so he'd only write again if I promised to keep our letters a secret."

Mary had agreed, and John had continued to write to her.

"He knew so many things about Darla. And he told me about you." Mary's voice became accusing again. "How you were a sorceress who seduced Darla with Dark Arts and got her expelled. How you'd been cursing people and causing trouble and you were even responsible for people dying. Darla followed you because you were popular and you were good at getting other people to go along with you."

Alexandra stifled a bitter laugh. "Did he mention that he was the leader of the Mors Mortis Society?"

"He said he dabbled a little bit with Dark Arts, the way most kids do, but when he realized that Darla was getting involved with the *really* dangerous stuff, he tried to get her to stop. But she wouldn't because she wanted to be as good as you, and you were always taunting her."

Alexandra put her elbows on her knees and stared at her feet as she listened to the rest of the story. In John Manuelito's twisted version, delivered to the naive, grieving eleven-year-old, he was the

concerned friend who had been unable to pull Darla free of Alexandra's seductive charisma. He continued exchanging letters with Darla and saw her when he could, but she was too deeply involved with Dark Arts, and with Alexandra. Alexandra was the leader, the one who controlled and manipulated others, and when she lured Darla into joining her for an unspeakable ritual in Charmbridge's basement, a ritual involving human sacrifice, it was Darla who didn't survive. But the influence of Alexandra's father protected her from retribution. The Enemy of the Confederation was somehow able to bribe or intimidate everyone from Confederation officials to the Dean of Charmbridge Academy.

"John told me he wanted vengeance," Mary whispered. "And I did, too."

In his owls, he taught Mary how to obtain forbidden items like mistletoe wands in the Goblin Market. He supplied her with books teaching her magic no one was supposed to know, let alone a sixth grader who'd just received her wand. And he asked her to spy on Alexandra, to tell him anything she learned about Alexandra's activities, her associates, her plans.

"After the cursed letter failed, he said you were too well protected," Mary said. "He was angry at me - he said I didn't really care enough about my sister to avenge her, because I wouldn't do everything he asked."

"What else did he want you to do?"

Mary bit her lip. Her fingers clutched the fabric of her robes, around her knees. "Before he attacked you with the crows, I was supposed to 'fall' off the Invisible Bridge to distract the chaperones. He said I wouldn't be in any danger because they'd catch me." She sniffed. "But I was too scared to do it. He had other ideas, like poison, curses, luring you into the basement and using Garroting Gas... but I read about it, and Garroting Gas won't usually kill someone before it drifts away. He said I could finish you off..." Mary shook. "I spied on you using Darla's Aural Amplifying Drops, and I tried to do some of the other things John suggested, but..." She began crying again. "He said we could have gotten you if I wasn't so weak and cowardly. Darla probably hates me, wherever she is, because you're still alive and she isn't."

Mary buried her face in her arms and sobbed, while Alexandra clenched her fists so tightly her nails dug into her palms. A part of her wanted to put an arm around the younger girl, to try to comfort her, but she knew that this she could not do.

"He's a liar," Alexandra said, when Mary's sobs had been replaced by deep, wracking breaths. "Everything John told you was a lie, but especially that."

Mary took a handkerchief out of another pocket in her robes and blew her nose.

"John is the coward," Alexandra said. "He hid outside the wards around the school and tried to get you to do his dirty work."

Mary sniffled. Then, quietly, she said, "You said you'd tell me how Darla died."

Echoes from older students coming inside and talking as they walked through the school reached Alexandra and Mary in the hallway. Alexandra leaned around the corner to peek down the corridor leading into the main part of the school. From where they were sitting, not far from the door, they could still hear rain outside, but they were alone in this part of the building. She sat back against the wall, stared at the opposite wall, and began.

Mary deserved to know the truth, but there were parts of the truth that she couldn't know. She couldn't know about the Generous Ones. She couldn't know about the Deathly Regiment. Alexandra doubted Mary would be able to keep silent if she found out what had been in store for her and what Darla's death had truly represented.

And so Alexandra did what she did best, even though she kept telling herself she wouldn't: she mixed truth with lies, and told Mary an edited version of what had happened in Charmbridge's basements. Mary would know about the Lands Below and Innocence from Nat, so Alexandra told her that Darla had intended to leave Innocence there, having been told by John that there were Powers in the Lands Below who would reward her for gifting them with a mortal child. She did not mention the Generous Ones, or that Darla had actually intended to kill Innocence.

Darla's death, Alexandra said, was the result of her trying to reopen the portal to the Lands Below, thinking to push her and Innocence through it.

"But the portal she opened went somewhere else, and... she went through." Alexandra was trying to keep her story close to the truth; Mary was listening so intently, she knew she didn't dare exaggerate or improvise too much. "She thought it was the only way... to undo what she'd done."

She told Mary the rest, and then said, "John tricked Darla. Taught her a bunch of rituals while lying to her about what they actually did. He bewitched Darla and made her do things she never would have done if not for him."

This was straying further from the truth. But Alexandra figured she could at least pin the blame on someone who deserved it, in a way that might give Mary some comfort.

Mary was silent for a long time after hearing Alexandra's story. Then she said, "You really tried to save her?"

"Yes. I tried to keep her from going through to the other side. She didn't have to." *You would have died instead, but Darla didn't have to.*

"Even though she tried to kill you?"

"Yes." Alexandra's own voice was hoarse now.

"Do you swear that's the truth?"

"Yes. On my witch's honor." The last part, at least, was true.

Mary was silent again.

After they listened to the rain pounding against the door some more, Mary asked, "What's going to happen to me?"

"If you stay away from Dark Arts, and John Manuelito, I think you'll be okay. No more mistletoe wands. And..." Alexandra lowered her voice. "Don't ever cast an Unforgivable again, or even hint at it. Swear that you won't, Mary."

They were finally looking at each other. Mary's eyes were red and her face was a runny mess, but there was a quiet intensity in her gaze that reminded Alexandra unnervingly of her sister.

"I swear," Mary said at last. She looked away, then she rose slowly to her feet.

"We can't be friends, Alexandra," she said, still looking away. "We can't ever be friends."

Alexandra said, "I know."

Mary stood there a moment, then trudged around the corner and down the hall toward the dorms. She wasn't dripping wet anymore, but her appearance might still be noticed by the hall monitor portrait. Alexandra rested her head against the wall behind her, rubbing her eyes with her fingertips. Darla had never had any problem sneaking around. If Mary couldn't avoid getting caught, Alexandra couldn't do much more for her.

Eventually, she got to her own feet and returned to her room.

Anna was pacing the room when Alexandra opened the door. Anna had let both their familiars in. Jingwei was in her cage and Charlie was perched in the opposite corner of the room, watching the owl suspiciously. When Alexandra entered, the raven fluttered to her shoulder and pecked her.

"Ow!" Alexandra pet the bird, and received another peck to her fingers. "Stop it."

"Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes," Charlie said.

Alexandra lifted Charlie off her shoulder and into the much smaller cage that was more of a shield than a confinement when Jingwei was in the room. She turned to Anna. "Are you going to peck me too?"

"That's not funny." Anna wasn't just unamused; she was angry.

Alexandra sat down on the edge of her bed. "Did Larry say anything else?"

"Not to me. I didn't stay to listen once I got him to the infirmary."

Alexandra exhaled. "All right. You're right. I shouldn't have gone out there to duel him. It was stupid. It was reckless. I let my ego get in the way of my common sense."

"That's a start," Anna said, only a little mollified. "But I still don't think you get it."

"I get it, Anna. I endangered myself. I endangered you." She didn't add that she'd only endangered Anna because she'd allowed her to come along.

"What did you think you were doing? I'm not talking about Larry, I'm talking about Mary!"

"Mary wasn't going to kill me."

"How can you say that? She used a mistletoe wa -" Anna fell silent, but her face grew angrier as Alexandra hushed her long enough to cast a Muffliato spell and then locked the door to the bathroom. "Oh, right," she said when Alexandra was done, "*now* you take precautions."

Alexandra folded her arms.

"Do you have a death wish?" Anna lowered her voice, despite the spell. "She learned the Killing Curse! She was going to *use* it on you!"

"No, she wasn't. She didn't have it in her."

"How do you know that? She thinks you killed her sister!"

"I knew, Anna. I knew when I saw her face. She was crazy with grief, and that made her do stupid things. You know I know what that's like. But she's not a killer. Darla wasn't really a killer, and Mary isn't as far gone as Darla was."

"You could tell all that just by looking at her face?" Anna folded her arms back, unconvinced. "You bet your life on that. What if you were wrong?"

"If Mary had actually tried to cast the Killing Curse at me. I seriously doubt she'd have killed me. Darla wasn't able to, and I don't think

Mary is stronger than Darla. So maybe she'd have given me a bloody nose. She might have knocked me out. I don't think she'd have had the nerve to keep trying to kill me, and it's not like you would have just stood there watching, right?"

"You sure sound certain considering you had no idea she'd be there in the first place. *What if you were wrong?*"

"What should I have done, Anna? Besides not go out there in the first place - I know that. Should I have just smacked her down as soon as I saw her?"

"YES!"

Alexandra was startled at Anna's reaction, and more startled when Anna sat down on her own bed and began crying.

"Only your friends know how you keep risking your life, Alex," Anna sobbed. "And we can't make you stop."

"I wasn't -" Alexandra stopped. She crossed the room and put her arms around her friend. "I'm sorry. I really have been trying not to be so 'high-headed.' But you have to trust me, Anna. I had to do what I did with Mary. I couldn't just blast her and drag her to the Dean's office."

"Why not?"

Alexandra sat back.

"You didn't kill Darla," Anna said softly. "Her death isn't your fault. You don't owe Mary your life for her sister's."

Alexandra shook her head. "Is that what you think I think? Mary was manipulated. It wasn't her who's been trying to kill me. I was right all along. It's John Manuelito."

Anna let Alexandra tell her the rest, everything she had learned from Mary. When she was finished, Anna said, "You should tell Ms. Grimm."

"I've already told Ms. Grimm that John Manuelito is out there, and she knows someone is definitely trying to kill me. If I tell her what happened last night, all of us will get in trouble for being out after curfew, at the very least, but you know I'll get the worst punishment,

except Mary. She'll be expelled. I know, Anna, maybe she deserves it. But..." Alexandra's voice trailed off.

"You feel responsible for her, because of Darla."

Alexandra's voice was very quiet. "I said I'd save Darla, and I didn't. It doesn't matter that it wasn't my fault. She's still dead. And she died to save her sister. The least I can do is try to protect her sister a little."

Anna shook her head slowly. "You're even more stubborn and frustrating when you're being noble."

Alexandra smiled and looked down.

Anna said, "So you're going to do nothing?"

"I'm going to be more careful. And I'm going to watch out for John Manuelito." Alexandra's smile faded. "I don't know why he wants me dead, but I'm sure he'll try again. And I'm going to do everything I can to be ready for him."

Anna shivered a little at whatever she saw in Alexandra's face.

John Manuelito. Alexandra's thoughts were dark indeed. For months she had been threatened by an unseen nemesis against whom she could not strike back. Now she knew for certain who her enemy was. And John hadn't just tried to kill her. He'd seduced Darla and tried to lure Darla's sister along the same path. Both Dearborn girls had been pawns of a cunning, dangerous psychopath. John couldn't have believed that an eleven-year-old would be able to commit cold-blooded murder. He'd used Mary to get information and make a few attempts on Alexandra's life from a safe distance, and when Mary was no longer useful, he'd cruelly twisted the knife of her grief for his own amusement.

Through all of her trials in the past three years, Alexandra had never had someone she could blame for her suffering who was still alive and at large, waiting for vengeance to be delivered. Now she did.

She swore to herself that John Manuelito was going to get what he deserved.

A Determined Elf

Constance and Forbearance knocked on the door of Alexandra and Anna's room early the following morning. They were upset and anxious after Anna's hurried note the previous night. Alexandra was obliged to let them into the room, cast a Muffliato spell, and tell them the whole story. By this time their suitemates had woken up. When Sonja found the door from the bathroom locked, she went out into the hallway and knocked on the door there.

"Hey," she said, looking into the room when Anna opened the door. The other four girls fell silent. "Me and Carol are going down to breakfast. Are you coming?"

Alexandra shrugged and said, "Sure." After being lectured by Anna the previous night, she was happy to end the conversation here. She didn't need to hear the Pritchards add their two pidges about how 'high-headed' she was.

The six girls walked downstairs (Carol, as usual, hovering on the other side of Sonja from Alexandra). Alexandra read the morning ninth grade bulletins with a knot in her stomach. She was sure she'd see 'Alexandra Quick: report to the Dean's office.'

But her name was not mentioned. There were congratulations from the Dean and Assistant Deans to all the Halloween contest winners, and Alexandra had to see Larry Albo's hateful name: 'Twice-consecutive winner of the Charmbridge Dueling Competition.' She patted Anna on the back for winning third place in the Academic Magic Bowl, and Constance for winning a blue ribbon for her Magical Theory essay.

"Check it," said a boy's voice, "chess champion in the house!"

"Shut up, Dylan," David said. As he and his roommate walked up to the girls gathered around the bulletin board, Alexandra noted that his annoyed tone did not match his pleased expression.

"Third place?" Constance said, scanning the announcements.

David frowned, and Constance blushed. "What I meant to mean was... third place is right respectable. Congratulations, David."

"Thanks," David mumbled. He turned to Alexandra. "So, what did Albo want to talk to you about last night, anyway?"

"Just the usual crap - taunting and gloating and stuff." Alexandra tried to ignore Anna's disapproving look. David snorted and nodded.

The growing entourage picked up another member when Innocence joined her sisters as they made their way to the cafeteria. Innocence was dressed more 'proper' than usual, with a bonnet covering her head.

As they entered the cafeteria, William smiled hopefully in their direction from the seventh graders' table, and Innocence turned her head and pretended not to notice him. William sighed and looked down at his cereal.

"Is you'uns still quarrelin'?" Constance asked.

"We hain't quarrelin' an' it don't make no nevermind to you nohow. He hain't my chub." Head held high, Innocence pushed forward to get in line for breakfast.

"William throwed their duel, you know," Forbearance whispered.

"She's all in a snit on account o' it," Constance said.

Poor William, Alexandra thought. He couldn't win for losing.

She looked to the sixth graders' table, and was concerned when she didn't see Mary Dearborn there. Midway through breakfast, Larry shambled in, trailed by Wade and Ethan. He looked not too much the worse for wear, but Alexandra quickly looked away from him and kept her eyes fixed on her food or her friends for the rest of the meal.

She was, in fact, rather surprised when Larry did not drift over to enjoy his triumph. She'd promised to endure his taunts, and now he could humiliate her with impunity in front of her friends. She expected him to take full advantage. But he took his tray to his own table and ignored her, even as she left the cafeteria with her friends.

Alexandra walked with them as far as the hallway outside, then told her friends to go on ahead. Anna hesitated, but didn't argue.

It was almost time for breakfast to stop being served when Mary finally came walking down the hall, surrounded by four other sixth

grade girls. She was obviously the center of the group, dressed in white and violet robes, looking pretty and fashionable and perhaps too elegant for a school day. There was nothing in her appearance to suggest that anything at all had happened to her last night.

She and Alexandra made eye contact and held it for a moment, while Mary's friends fell silent. Alexandra nodded. Mary looked away, and the younger girls resumed chattering. Alexandra let out a breath.

Mary was all right, and apparently Larry had not reported her. Alexandra could now put Darla's sister out of her mind. She pushed away from the wall she'd been leaning against and started to hurry off to her Confederation Citizenship class.

"Quick."

She froze when she heard the voice. She didn't move as footsteps approached her, but when they stopped, she slowly turned to face Larry.

His friends were hanging back by the cafeteria exit, nonplussed. Had Larry told them to wait there? Other students were passing by, some of whom recognized Larry and Alexandra, but no one stopped to watch the confrontation, yet.

At least my friends aren't here to see this, she thought, though she had no doubt she wouldn't be so lucky next time. She closed her eyes, preparing herself for whatever abuse he was about to inflict. All she could do was take it. At least he would graduate in two years. She only had to put up with it until then.

"Why are you protecting her?" Larry asked in a low voice.

Alexandra opened her eyes. "What?"

Larry leaned close enough to speak in a whisper. "Mary Dearborn. Why would you protect her?"

She looked up at him. "Why does it matter?"

His expression was more quizzical than angry. "She didn't just want to curse you. She wanted to kill you."

"A sixth grader? Come on."

"Everyone says you killed Darla Dearborn."

"Do you really think I'd still be here if that were true?" She regretted saying that as soon as the words escaped her lips. Of course he thought she'd still be here. Like everyone else, he probably assumed her all-powerful father, who'd been a fugitive since the day she was born yet was still able to do anything on her behalf, had somehow kept her enrolled at Charmbridge Academy regardless of her dark deeds.

Larry seemed to be thinking that over. Then he said, "The little brat wanted revenge, but you went out of your way to protect her. Why?"

Alexandra's jaw clenched. "I swore to yield to you and take your crap. I didn't swear to answer questions about my personal business. If you don't have anything else to say to me, I'm going now."

When she started to leave, he said, "It didn't happen."

She stopped. "What?"

"It didn't happen," he said tightly. "There was no duel."

Alexandra was speechless. Larry's brow remained furrowed in thought, then he spun around and gestured at Ethan and Wade. The two of them gave her puzzled glares, then stalked off down the hallway with Larry. The bell rang, telling her she was late for first period.

In the afterglow of her righteous fury, Alexandra had to admit that swearing vengeance against John Manuelito didn't mean much if she had no way to find him. Even if she had an idea of where he was (besides the vague rumors that he'd returned to the Indian Territories), she couldn't just leave Charmbridge Academy to go hunting for him.

Well, I could. But then she'd be a runaway. If she used magic outside of Charmbridge Academy, the Trace Office would send Diana Grimm or another Special Inquisitor right to her. And she couldn't imagine how she'd find John, much less deliver justice, without magic.

When she made the mistake of sharing these thoughts with Anna while they were studying in the library, Anna dropped her quill. It took her a moment to pick it up again. "You aren't seriously planning to go after John Manuelito yourself?"

"Not right away." Alexandra pushed away her magical theory textbook and opened a map of the Confederation in the book lying beneath it. "The Indian Territories are pretty big, and obviously I need to know more about the area. They don't teach us much in school about Indian magic or how they govern their Territories or what kind of magical creatures live there. So I figure it will take a while, and I certainly won't do it during the school year..." Her voice trailed off. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're crazy," Anna said. "This is seriously insane. Do you realize that? This is *just like* you going to the Lands Below, or stealing a Time-Turner, or trying to summon Death. You're planning to do something really dangerous that you're not even a little bit prepared for. And what good will it do you? Suppose you do find John Manuelito. What will you do then? Duel him? *Kill* him?"

Alexandra tried to speak, but Anna kept going. "Is it that hard to admit that you can't do everything? Let the Wizard Justice Department find John Manuelito."

"Yes, they've done a great job of finding Dark Wizards so far."

"And you're better than all of them?" Anna slapped her book shut and muttered something in Chinese. "Why don't you send your father after him if this is that important to you?"

Alexandra's expression changed, and Anna dropped her gaze.

Alexandra touched Anna's hand. "It's not like I'm planning to go chasing John Manuelito during the winter break. I'm just thinking ahead."

They stopped talking when Constance and Forbearance joined them at the table, the latter carrying an armful of scrolls.

"We'uns could hear y'all," Constance whispered. Alexandra flushed.

"If'n you're layin' plans for the future, maybe you oughter think 'bout matters closer to hand," Forbearance said, spreading a star chart

over Alexandra's territorial map. "That matter of seven years belike?"

Forbearance ignored the baleful stare that had cowed Anna. Her finger traced a constellation on the chart. "Seven's a powerful number, Alex. It's got a powerful weight in your life. Seven sisters, seven years, and right now your star is in the seventh house."

"You could probably find sevens in anyone's life if you looked hard enough." Alexandra wasn't in the mood to rein in her skepticism.

"There's a ritual for drawin' down the stars," Forbearance said.

The non sequitur made Alexandra pause. "What does that mean?"

"It means consultin' the Stars Above." Constance sounded more scornful than Alexandra. "Just like we was ancient heathens. I told Forbearance this is foolishness..."

"You can't say it's foolishness when you don't understand it nohow," Forbearance said.

Alexandra interrupted them. "Forbearance, drawing my charts is one thing, but how exactly do you consult the stars? And what good will it do?"

Forbearance took out her wand and solemnly said, "*Muffliato*." No one else spoke as she put her wand back into a pocket in the front of her dress.

"When I say we'uns can draw down the stars, I don't just mean astrological chartin'. I know what you think, Alex, that this is all foolishness like them Muggle horror-scopes, but it hain't. The Stars Above are Named, Powers." Her eyes met Alexandra's, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "I know you believe in Powers."

Alexandra studied the charts. "Suppose they are real. What's that to me?"

"You went to treat with the Most Deathly Power 'cause he has power over the Lands Beyond. The Stars Above have power over fate 'n destiny."

"You think the Stars Above could free me from my... Geas?"

"Might could. Leastwise they could tell the nature of it: whether you really is fated, and what lies down the paths -"

"This is crazy." Anna's voice had the shrill quaver in it she got when she was upset. "You're actually *encouraging* Alex to go messing with Powers again?"

Constance nodded in agreement. Her arms were folded across her chest, but she looked more disturbed than dismissive.

"If we could all cast a spell and wish upon a star, every witch and wizard would be doing it," Alexandra said, though she wasn't quite as skeptical as before.

"Course it hain't that simple." Forbearance opened another book, a very old one with a musty smell that was on the verge of falling apart. "Drawin' down the stars don't summon 'em or put 'em at your command. It just allows you to speak to 'em, with no guarantee they'll speak back. It's a plumb hard work and it requires - well, for you, now, seven people. That an' it bein' old and out of fashion and not 'zactly approved..." Forbearance glanced sidelong at her sister. "Hain't no surprise you don't hear much 'bout it bein' done nowadays, but that don't mean it don't work. We knows for a fact -"

"Forbearance!" Constance said sharply.

"I don't want you to get in trouble for telling me Ozarker secrets," Alexandra said.

"This hain't an Ozarker book." Forbearance laid the dusty tome on the table.

The cover was so faded that Alexandra couldn't even read the title. "Where did you get that?"

"You hain't the only one who can poke 'round in old books. Or talk to library elves."

Alexandra was surprised. "You talked to Bran and Poe?"

"You done mentioned 'em oftenish." Forbearance smiled. "They really is lovely fellers. And when I told 'em I was tryin' to help you..."

Alexandra knew it was silly - Bran and Poe weren't just *her* friends, after all - but she felt a stab of irrational jealousy. She pushed it out

of her mind. "This ritual for 'drawing down the stars' requires seven people? Why?"

"That's just how it works out. You're one, so we need six more people who's bounden to you."

"Bounden to me?"

"It can't be just anyone. Only folks who love you, or 'least cares 'bout you. They has to be tied to your destiny."

Alexandra folded her arms. "Aren't people who hate me also tied to my destiny?"

Forbearance *tsked*. "Now you're just bein' pricklish. Don't make no sense to ask people who hate you for help, does it?"

Alexandra rubbed her forehead. "And where are we going to find six people who *love* me?"

Forbearance laid her hands on the book. "Me, Constance, Anna, an' David makes four."

"Have you asked David about this and told him he's supposed to love me?"

"You know it's true. I know he don't fancy you, but that's different." Forbearance bit her lip. "Innocence *could* stand on one o' the points..."

"I thought we agreed we're not going to involve Innocence."

"That just needs one more." Forbearance sighed. "If Innocence weren't still so provoked at William..."

"William? No way!"

"Well, there's Sonja. She's been studyin' Astronomy an' Astrology too an' I'm sure she'd love to help."

"She'd tell everyone in school about it!"

"Oh, Alex, I'm sure she wouldn't tat no tales."

"That would be a first. And what makes you think she cares about me?"

Anna spoke up. "Really?"

Alexandra gave her a puzzled look. Anna shook her head. "Sonja wants to be your friend. She's wanted you to like her since she moved next door last year."

Alexandra stared at her roommate.

Anna said, "Sometimes you're pretty clueless, Alex."

"Well," Forbearance said in the silence that followed, "I reckon Sonja will do."

Alexandra turned to her. "Forbearance, I don't see what good this will do even if we can get everyone together - which is a bad idea because I'm totally not cool with involving Innocence or Sonja. You think the Stars Above will tell me how to get out of my promise?"

Forbearance pursed her lips. "If'n this had been *your* idear, you wouldn't let no one tell you it was silly if'n you thought there was the least chance it might work. I done read up and studied this and I think there's a chance. It can't hurt, leastwise."

Anna and Constance both protested at the same time. Anna was worried, Constance was skeptical, and neither of them wanted to involve more people or risk getting in trouble.

Alexandra listened to them argue, then said, "We have to do it without telling Innocence or Sonja the details. That means either lying to them or telling them they can't know everything. Also, Anna and Constance obviously aren't exactly cool with this either."

Forbearance said, "Innocence will do anything if'n we tell her it's for you. Even keep her mouth shut. Hain't a lie not to tell Sonja what she don't ask. And Connie will come 'round. I reckon Anna will, too, if'n we give 'em some time to think on it."

"Hello? We are still here," Anna said.

There was an uncomfortable silence as Constance and Anna both fumed.

"I'm not going to try to make anyone do anything they don't want to do," Alexandra said at last. "And I'm not so sure about this 'Stars Above' thing. But I'm willing to try it."

Forbearance's face brightened. "Well, I'll get to work on the verse an' the diagrams, then. Sonja can help with that. So could Connie and Anna if they was a mind to. Anna's good with numerology..."

"You stop tryin' to guilt me 'fore I even agree to be part of this," Constance said.

Anna said nothing.

Alexandra said, "There's no hurry, right? If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. Anna, it's okay if you don't want to do this - really. I know I've gotten you to go along with things you didn't approve of before. I won't this time."

Anna laid her head down in her arms. "You're just making it *harder* to say no." And she refused to say anything else about it that night.

Alexandra didn't bring the ritual up again. She considered it mostly humoring Forbearance. She had a certain amount of curiosity about the idea of 'drawing down the stars,' but she had no faith in astrology, and she was deeply uncomfortable about getting more people involved in her problems.

Forbearance was determined, though. When Alexandra saw Forbearance and Sonja huddled together giving her meaningful looks, she knew it was just a matter of time before they would actually want to try their astrological ritual.

For the first part of November, Alexandra's mind was on three things: studying, dueling, and vengeance. The first took up most of her time, as she was determined to jump ahead to more advanced classes in January. She thought she belonged in higher-level Charms, Transfiguration, and Magical Theory classes, but skipping levels between semesters required 'A' grades and Superior SPAWN scores.

She enjoyed dueling more, even with Larry preening over his continued reign as Charmbridge's Dueling Champion. He never

mentioned their encounter in the woods, but he took great delight in beating Alexandra again and again. Every time they dueled, she lost. It was more bruising and humiliating than she would ever admit. After every defeat, she gave him a bow and hobbled off the dueling platform, refusing to show discouragement beneath the eyes of Ms. Shirtliffe and the rest of the Dueling Club. No matter how many times she needed to be patched up by Mrs. Murphy afterward, she always accepted his challenges.

The problem of finding John Manuelito nagged at her without resolution until one afternoon when she went to the office to collect another letter from Payton. She had told him to stop addressing his owls to Anna, and also not to write anything mushy or romantic or private. Thus their correspondence had become banal descriptions of classes and plans to talk on the phone over winter break. Alexandra was walking back to her room while skimming his latest letter for any embarrassing passages she'd be mortified for Mr. Grue to have seen, when a thought struck her, causing her to stop where she was in the middle of the hallway, before tucking the letter into her pocket.

She had questions about elves, which meant she had to go see Bran and Poe.

She waited until late that night - almost past curfew for ninth graders - before she went to visit the library elves. Usually they hid in the room behind Mrs. Minder's office when there were students about. The library was mostly empty as Alexandra walked through it. It wouldn't be full late at night until December, when everyone would be studying for finals. But she paused when she saw Bathsheba Anderson sitting by herself at a corner table, scratching away with a quill on a very long piece of parchment with books piled around her.

Alexandra looked between Bathsheba, lit only by the glow of the lamp above her, and the darkened librarian's office, and glanced at the clock ticking its way toward closing time. She took a deep breath and walked directly over to the older girl. Bathsheba didn't notice her until Alexandra was almost at her side. Her books had titles like *Thaumaturgical Approaches to Reification* and *Advanced Letters in Post-Modern Spheres*. Bathsheba's brow was so furrowed that when she looked up, Alexandra thought guiltily that she must have torn the eleventh grader away from some deep, intricate thaumaturgical problem.

Alexandra cleared her throat. "I, um, I just wanted to say thank you."

Confusion replaced irritation on the older girl's face. "Thank me?"

Alexandra stuck her hands in her pockets. "You know. For talking Larry into letting me off."

"Letting you off?" Bathsheba continued to look baffled.

Alexandra sighed. "Our duel. I figure it was you who got him to forget about it."

"I don't know anything about your duel or what happened and I don't want to know. Frankly, I think you're both immature and ridiculous. You're just a freshman, but Larry has no excuse, and I told him so."

Alexandra stood there with her mouth hanging open, first to protest and then to ask something else, but she didn't know what. Bathsheba hadn't been to dueling practice in a couple of weeks. Had she even seen Bathsheba and Larry walking together in the hallways lately?

She closed her mouth.

"If you don't mind, I have a lot of studying to do," Bathsheba said.

"Sorry." Alexandra walked away, turned the corner around the long stack of shelves, and followed the back wall to the unmarked door behind which Bran and Poe were often working. She looked around to make sure no other students were in sight, then knocked on the door, very lightly.

"Bran? Poe?" she whispered. "It's me - Alexandra."

After several seconds, the lock clacked and the door swung inward. Alexandra stepped inside, and it closed behind her.

The two library elves were not repairing books or handling paperwork. They were both mending a huge, oversized sweater. Charmbridge's elves often wore discarded items taken from the Lost & Found, and Bran and Poe were fond of woolen caps and sweaters large enough for them to disappear into. There were several enormous balls of yarn on the floor, and Bran was holding a pair of knitting needles that looked like javelins in his tiny hands, while Poe was snipping off a piece of thread.

"Hello, Miss Alex," Bran said.

"We is very happy to see you," Poe said.

"Hi, guys." Alexandra sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of them. She watched as Bran continued knitting. "Can't you use magic to do that?" When Charmbridge students sent robes and other clothing to be repaired by Charmbridge's elves, they were always returned within a day, restored to perfect condition.

"Not for ourselves, Alex," said Poe.

"Besides," said Bran, "knitting and mending is relaxing."

"Books we fix with love, but clothing is just simple work."

"Oh." Alexandra watched Bran knit at a speed a sewing machine would have difficulty matching.

"It is almost time for curfew," Poe said.

"Miss Alex should ask what she wants to ask us so she can go to bed and not get in trouble," Bran said, with a sly wink.

Alexandra flushed, but she said, "My father's elves can find him, even though the Office of Special Inquisitions can't." She saw the look that passed between Bran and Poe at the mention of her father, but she went on. "Why hasn't an Inquisitor just made his elves lead them to him? If elves can find people that Inquisitors can't, why doesn't the WJD use elves in the first place?"

When they didn't answer immediately, Alexandra said, "I'm sorry if this is stuff you don't like talking about. If you don't want to tell me, it's okay."

Bran's face scrunched up. "Is Alex trying to find her father again?"

She shook her head. "Not this time."

"Who is Miss Alex trying to find?" Poe asked.

She looked down. "I'd rather not say. I don't want to get any elves in trouble, and I swear I won't do anything wicked."

Bran and Poe pondered that. Then Bran said, "There is two ways an elf can find someone who does not want to be found. The first is if that elf is a servant of that someone."

Poe nodded. "Miss Alex's father's elves is surely loyal to him. They can find him, but if they was *forced* to find him for someone else -"

"No. It is too terrible to ask any elf." Both elves shuddered.

So not even the WJD could make an elf turn traitor, Alexandra thought. "What's the other way?"

The elves grimaced.

"Elves has no magic to find a wizard in hiding," Bran said.

"But, elves can travel anywhere and very fast," Poe said.

"Elves can look in every corner of the world."

"And under and above it."

"High and low, from near to far."

"It is very hard to outrun a determined elf."

Alexandra thought that over. "So why doesn't the Wizard Justice Department just use elves to hunt for Dark Wizards?"

Bran and Poe looked horrified.

"Elves is servants," Bran said.

"Elves is meant to be *helpful*," Poe said.

"Asking elves to do things that is the work of wizards -"

"That is not part of the Compact."

"Is this Compact written down anywhere?" Alexandra knew immediately by their woeful expressions that her question was naive and inappropriate. "Sorry."

Bran and Poe sighed. "It has happened that an elf has been told to find someone. But this is not the normal duties of an elf."

"I see." Alexandra wasn't sure she did, not entirely, but she got the gist of it. Obviously, if the Wizard Justice Department could turn elves into Special Inquisitors, they would. "You're right, it is almost time for me to be getting back to my room. Thank you for telling me what I needed to know."

The two library elves looked a little uneasy at that, but she smiled reassuringly. "I told you, I won't ask any elves to do anything that would hurt them, and I'm not looking to get myself in trouble."

Bran said, "Miss Alex's intentions is always good."

Poe tapped an admonishing finger on his nose. "But her actions, sometimes not so much."

Alexandra turned a little red. "Okay, I deserve that."

Bran sighed. "Miss Alex had better be going."

She made them blush also by kissing each of them on the cheek. "I'll be back soon."

"We hopes so," said Bran.

"We hopes Miss Alex's friend Miss Pritchard will visit again, too," said Poe. "She is very nice."

"Although, we is not *quite* certain about what she is up to, either."

"Forbearance is very nice, and you don't need to worry about her," Alexandra said. "Trust me, her intentions and her actions are always good."

When she hurried back to her room, passing under the gaze of the portrait over her hall who tut-tutted as he tapped a pocket watch displaying the time, her mind was on the most important information Bran and Poe had given her, which was what they had left unsaid.

A determined elf could hunt to the ends of the Earth to find someone, but only if it fell within the elf's normal range of duties.

Or, she thought, if the elf wanted to do it.

She had only ever known one free elf: Quimley, the former house-elf who now lived among the Generous Ones in the Lands Below. He

had saved her once, though he had not been able to save her brother. He had told her that if she ever summoned him, he would come.

The Dearborns' house-elf Nat had Apparated in and out of Charmbridge without being detected, so Alexandra figured that elves could bypass Ms. Grimm's wards. That didn't mean that summoning Quimley to her room was a good idea, if for no other reason than she could foresee Anna's objections.

Alexandra hadn't even decided yet what she would do if Quimley *could* find John Manuelito. As long as she wasn't actually taking any action, she reasoned that there was no need for Anna to know about this particular inquiry.

Alexandra sneaked outside one evening after dueling practice. November became cold quickly, and few students wanted to be out after dark, so no one else was in sight when she walked all the way back to the dueling field and climbed up onto the platform. From here, she could see the warm glow of light shining out of Charmbridge Academy's windows, and the black outline of trees against the dark sky in all directions, but she felt all alone beneath the stars above. She craned her neck and studied them, trying to identify the Seven Sisters and Troublesome, and wondered if there really were Powers up there who could see her future and tell her how to escape it.

No matter now. She wasn't dealing with stars or Powers: she was dealing with elves. She turned her attention back to earth, and recited the spell she had prepared for this occasion:

"Not with bindings or demands -

Free elves don't obey commands -

But by the name you gave me when

You said that I could call you friend:

Quimley, hear my summons where

You live in the Generous Ones' lair.

Come to me if you will."

She stood silent and motionless after the last, non-rhyming line. She thought it gave her verse a nice coda (a term she'd learned after reading about poetry in an effort to improve her own verses) but she wasn't sure whether this innovation would improve its effectiveness. As usual, she couldn't be sure her spell would have any effect at all, though she thought she'd wrapped words, intent, and magic into one - creating her own spell, exactly as Magical Theory said you could do, though her teachers had always told her doggerel verse was dangerous and ineffective.

Quimley had told her that if she summoned him, he'd come, but it might take a while. So she was hopeful as she stood there alone in the night, but not necessarily expecting the elf would appear before her just like that.

With a pop, he did.

Alexandra had never been able to determine Quimley's age. He was bald and a little wrinkled, but it was hard to tell whether his stooped posture was from age or the hard life he'd led, in which she suspected he'd been horribly abused by his former masters. He huddled before her, shoulders hunched beneath the oversized denim jacket he always wore, looking up at her with eyes that were the only part of his face she could make out in the darkness.

She fell to her knees in front of him. "Quimley! Thank you for coming." She put her arms around the elf and hugged him.

"Is Alexandra Quick well?" Quimley asked as she let go of him.

"I'm fine. How have you been? Are you still living with the Generous Ones?"

"Yes. Quimley does small things - mending, fixing, sewing, sometimes painting and pottery. It is not a bad life Quimley lives with the Generous Ones."

"Do you have friends there?"

Quimley's eyes blinked slowly at her. "The Generous Ones call no one friend."

That left her momentarily at a loss for words.

"Has Alexandra Quick told her father of her bargain with the Generous Ones?" he asked.

"No."

Quimley's eyes became wide. "Quimley does not understand. Why would Alexandra Quick not tell the great wizard Abraham Thorn of her pact? Surely she knows the Generous Ones *will* demand that she fulfill her promise?"

"I know they will, Quimley. I'm working on it, but my father - well, it's complicated."

Quimley stood there, wringing his hands slowly, then said, "Did Alexandra Quick call Quimley because she needs Quimley's help?"

"Yes. I want to ask you a favor."

"Anything Quimley can do for Abraham Thorn's daughter, he will do."

"Can you find somebody? Somebody who lives here in the Lands Above? Without them knowing you're looking for them?"

The elf tilted his head. "Alexandra Quick wants to find somebody?"

"A wizard. A Dark Wizard. I think he's in Chicago, dealing with hags and other members of the Dark Convention. I don't want you to do anything to him, Quimley. I don't want you to speak to him or be seen by him or anything. I just want to know where he is and how to find him. If it would be dangerous to you, forget it."

"Elves can do many things, but we have no magic to tell us where someone we do not know and do not serve is to be found. We must go looking."

"Can you do that? Without risking being caught or anything else bad happening? I was told elves have ways of finding people, even Dark Wizards who have hidden themselves."

"We can talk to many beings, and we can travel quickly. We have ways. But Quimley cannot promise, and Quimley cannot say how long it might take."

"Is there something I could do for you in exchange? I could... pay you."

She hoped that wouldn't offend the former house-elf, but his eyes merely remained wide and puzzled. "What payment, Alexandra Quick?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to ask for such a big favor and not offer anything in return."

"Alexandra Quick makes such offers despite knowing the dangers of bargaining favors."

"Can't be worse than the danger I'm already in. And any favor you want from me, Quimley -"

"Please," the elf interrupted, "do not offer such things so freely! Alexandra Quick is slow to learn." His worried tone took little of the sting out of his words.

"I don't believe you'd ask me for anything bad."

"Quimley would not." Quimley was silent for several moments. "What is the name of the wizard Alexandra Quick wants Quimley to find?"

"John Manuelito. I don't suppose you've heard of him?"

The elf shook his head.

"He's the one who sent Darla Dearborn to the Lands Below." Quickly, Alexandra told Quimley everything that had happened after he left her and Darla and Innocence in the sub-basement below Charmbridge Academy. His eyes became watery as Alexandra recounted Darla's death, unable to conceal her own feelings of guilt. Then she told him about the series of attempts on her life this year, and Mary's involvement.

Neither of them spoke for a while after that. Then Quimley said, "What does Alexandra Quick mean to do if she finds John Manuelito?"

"I don't know. I just want to know where he is."

"Quimley thinks Alexandra Quick doesn't ask for this favor because she is just curious."

She looked down at her hands, clasped and pressed between her knees to warm them.

Quimley said, "Quimley is worried that Alexandra Quick wants vengeance. That is not a good reason to look for someone."

"How about so he'll stop trying to kill me?"

Quimley scratched his one ear. In place of the other ear was an ugly scar that wasn't visible in the starlight. "What Alexandra Quick asks is not easy. But Quimley will look." Before Alexandra could thank him, he said, "Alexandra Quick must promise two things."

"All right."

"First, be less quick to make promises. Think once, then twice, before promising anything else."

"If I say yes, am I breaking my promise?"

Quimley squinted at her. "Quimley means this seriously."

"I'm sorry." She took a deep breath. "I promise to think twice before making any more promises."

"Second, Alexandra Quick must tell her father about her bargain with the Generous Ones."

Now she was the one who squinted. "Why do you want me to tell him?"

"Because if anyone can help Alexandra Quick, her father can."

"I know you believe he's a great man because he was kind to house-elves, but I don't trust him as much as you do, Quimley."

"Trust Quimley, then. Tell Abraham Thorn."

She unclasped her hands and pressed her palms against her knees. "Can I promise I'll think about it? Twice?"

"Alexandra Quick is very stubborn."

"Also reckless, ruthless, and bold. So I've been told. Please, Quimley?"

Quimley sighed. "Quimley will not take Alexandra Quick to this bad wizard, even if he finds him. But Quimley will learn if John Manuelito is seeking to harm Abraham Thorn's daughter."

"He's dangerous. I don't want you to do anything that puts you in danger."

"Leaving the Lands Below puts Quimley in danger." When Alexandra winced, he added, "But Quimley chose it. Quimley will not be seen or heard and his name will not be learned, not by John Manuelito or any other wizard."

"Be careful, Quimley." Alexandra kissed the top of his bare, scarred scalp. "Thank you."

"Also be careful, daughter of Abraham Thorn." Quimley tugged the oversized collar of his jacket in the cold breeze rising from the woods, and then he vanished.

Beneath the Stars Above

The next day, Forbearance and Sonja accosted Alexandra in the hallway.

"Forbearance told me that you want to perform a ritual to draw down the stars," Sonja said. "That is so wicked! We read about the Stars Above in class, but Mrs. Estrella won't let us do it. I'm really flattered that you want my help."

"I wasn't aware that we'uns had agreed to this," Alexandra said, looking pointedly at Forbearance.

Forbearance reddened. "Anna's come 'round, and we persuaded Constance. We hain't yet told Innocence, but there's no doubt o' her."

"What about David?"

"Constance is gonna talk to him."

"I see. The Alexandra Committee has been meeting behind my back again."

"Alexandra Committee?" Sonja giggled as Forbearance turned a deeper shade of red. Alexandra stopped in the hall, and the other two girls skidded to a halt.

"If we do this, you understand I want it to be kept secret?"

Sonja smiled ingenuously and put a finger to her lips.

"Are you absolutely, one-hundred percent certain there's no danger involved in this ritual?" Alexandra asked Forbearance.

"Hain't no magic ritual that's gin-certain, Alex. You know that."

"I won't have any of you risking yourselves."

Forbearance smiled nervously. "The risk be your'n - if'n you meet Powers."

"You know, if this does work, it would be such a fantastic extra-credit project!" Sonja's voice trailed off as Alexandra glared at her. "I'm just saying - Mrs. Estrella would give us a high grade for sure."

"No extra credit. No telling Mrs. Estrella. If you're not okay with that, then forget about it."

Sonja pouted. "Oh, Alexandra. You are such a grumbly gnoll sometimes."

Remembering Anna's reproach, Alexandra said, in a more careful tone, "Thanks for agreeing to help me."

"Well, it will be fun, at least. Even if it doesn't work. Though I hope it does. Those signs of yours really are rather ominous."

"There's no need to make a big deal out of it. Or tell anyone else." Alexandra emphasized the last part.

"Got it. Really." Sonja put a finger over her lips again and winked.

In their room that evening, Alexandra found Anna examining the clean robes that had just been returned to her. Clockworks delivered the laundry now, though it was unclear whether it was elves or Clockworks who actually did the washing. Anna's father had required her to buy attire 'appropriate to her station' from Madame Wu's, but the dragons and phoenixes woven with magical thread into the fine Chinese silk kept fraying. Anna had been complaining about the damage to her robes, though she carefully avoided blaming the elves.

Alexandra tossed her own pile of clean robes into a drawer and said, "I thought you were against me messing around with Powers again."

"I don't like it," Anna said. "But Forbearance is convinced that your stars say you're on a path to calamity."

"You're starting to sound like her. Do you really believe in all this astrology nonsense?"

"If you think it's nonsense, why are you agreeing to the ritual?"

"I don't believe in astrology. But I do believe in Powers."

Anna lowered the red and yellow robe she was holding. "So you want to meet Powers and make a deal with them?"

"Maybe."

"Or maybe you're just curious."

"Is it so bad to be curious? I'm agreeing to try something Forbearance suggested. She's not exactly reckless and eager to play with dangerous magic."

Anna didn't look at Alexandra. "I wish you'd take things seriously instead of becoming obsessed with things that aren't your problem, or else carrying on your stupid feud with Larry Albo or the Rashes."

Alexandra moved closer to Anna. "What should I be doing, Anna? Walk around all the time thinking 'Oh no, I'm doomed'? You think I'm not taking this seriously? You're not inside my head, you don't know what I'm thinking."

Anna sniffed. "You don't tell me what you're thinking."

"I do." Alexandra sighed. "Usually. Except when I'm afraid you'll freak out because you worry too much. Like if I tell you I sent Quimley to find John Manuelito for me."

Anna dropped her robes. "Who's Quimley?"

"The ex-house-elf I told you about who lives with the Generous Ones."

"You went to the *Lands Below* again?" Anna's face turned white.

"Ssh! No, of course not. I summoned Quimley - voluntarily, I mean, it was voluntary for him to come. And he's going to try to find where John Manuelito is hiding."

Anna could do nothing but stare, aghast. "What did you tell him to do if he finds him?"

"Nothing. Just tell me."

"And then you're going to go after John, instead of maybe *telling the Wizard Justice Department*?"

"I'm not sure the Wizard Justice Department will even do anything. He's got to pay, Anna. Also, he has tried to kill me several times, and I doubt he's given up just because he can't use Mary anymore."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you'd want to know. Also, if I do meet the Stars Above..." Alexandra's tone became harder. "Forbearance said the Seven Sisters are associated with war, secrets, betrayal, and *vengeance*."

"You're conveniently forgetting forgiveness. Also night, water, oceans - Alex, we're not doing this so you can get John Manuelito. We're doing this so we can save your life."

"Getting John Manuelito might help. How do you know John Manuelito's not the dire calamity the stars are warning me about?"

Anna didn't like that idea at all.

"I'm trying to keep my promise not to hide things from you," Alexandra said. "It's a lot harder when you get upset every time I tell you something."

"It's hard not to get upset when you're being stupid."

"Are we fighting again?"

Anna sat down right on top of her folded robes and put her face in her hands.

Alexandra sat next to her, careful not to sit on the robes herself, and put an arm around Anna's shoulders. "I don't plan on dying. Not now, and not in seven years."

Anna dropped her hands and gave Alexandra a look that was half-sardonic, half-fearful. "Promise?"

Alexandra thought once, then twice. "I promise." If she wasn't able to keep that promise, it would hardly matter.

On a cold and windy evening a week before Thanksgiving, seven students walked furtively in a line across Charmbridge's lawn, seeking a flat grassy area concealed from the school by a small hill. As usual, there weren't many other students out this late because it was so cold, but Warming Charms and cloaks were good protection from the chill, and juniors and seniors sometimes ventured out in couples or groups. Most were going to the Glade; Alexandra and her friends headed in the opposite direction.

Being so cold and windy, it was also remarkably clear, and since Charmbridge Academy was far from any Muggle cities, the stars were especially bright and numerous. Normally Alexandra would have just appreciated their beauty, but thinking of the stars above as living entities made her feel a little dwarfed and humbled. She could tell by the way her friends walked in silence, even Sonja and Innocence, that they were similarly affected.

The stars, of course, could not literally be living entities. Alexandra knew enough about astronomy to know that. No matter what she learned about magic, the stars were huge balls of burning gas impossibly vast distances away, and the light spread across the sky had started on its journey toward Earth hundreds or thousands of years ago. Some of the stars they were seeing now might have died before humans even existed. Alexandra knew this.

Forbearance knew it, too. She was rather offended that Alexandra thought she was ignorant of what a light year was.

"I read some Muggle science books," Forbearance had said. "They're right lettered, them scientists. But magic says two things can be true even if'n one says the other's impossible."

"That doesn't make any sense," Alexandra said.

"You don't misdoubt science 'cause you can do magic, do you?"

"Well, no, but -"

"Science an' magic is both true," Forbearance said, "that's what I think."

Alexandra didn't see how this could be, but she didn't see how it could not be either. She was just barely aware that she didn't know enough about either science or magic. So she contemplated the stars as everyone came to a halt at the chosen spot, and wondered how the stars could be both Powers and enormous nuclear reactions floating in space trillions of miles away. Surely *all* the stars couldn't be Powers - there would be billions and billions!

"Glory," said Innocence, looking up at the sky, "that's a power o' stars!" For the ritual, she was wearing a cloak over her finest dress, and her hair was neatly covered by the bonnet she usually refused to wear at school.

Everyone was dressed formally, even Alexandra. Forbearance and Sonja said that what they wore didn't really affect the casting of the spell, but wizards performing rituals like this always dressed in their best garb, because it was traditional and, as Forbearance put it, "It makes you treat it serious."

Anna had put her hair in Chinese pigtails again, and wore a bright golden robe with silver and emerald brocade. Alexandra had pointed out that this was not exactly appropriate for sneaking outside at night.

"Neither is Sonja's hair," Anna replied, and Sonja laughed. The last few weeks Sonja had taken to enchanting her hair so that its normal fiery red was nearly literal. It was a fashion that had become popular with witches of all hues: blonde hair glowed with reflected sunlight in the hallways, and dark hair shimmered like glossy, polished stone. So far the teachers hadn't cracked down on the fad, but Alexandra was annoyed that Sonja hadn't undone her hair charm. She wore a hooded cloak, but her head still looked like a half-covered lantern glowing in the night. Hardly any of Alexandra's friends knew the first thing about being stealthy.

Charlie cawed. Alexandra made a shushing noise. Forbearance and Sonja weren't sure how to factor a familiar into their astrological calculations, but they thought Alexandra should bring hers. The raven sat on her shoulder with an imperious air, evidently feeling part of the seriousness of this gathering.

David pulled his robes tighter and shivered. "It's freezing out here. We don't have to do this 'Stars Above' ritual naked, do we?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "You first."

Sonja giggled. Constance wrapped her arms around herself. "David Washington, where would you ever take a notion like that?"

"He's thinking of skyclad rituals," Sonja said. "I've heard some Muggles do that."

"Some witches did, too, long time ago," Forbearance said. And hastily added, "Never in the Ozarks!"

While Forbearance lit her wand and began checking the scroll she'd prepared, Sonja officiously positioned everyone else, using a

variation of the Compass Spell. Her wand indicated where each person was to stand, at the point of an imaginary six-pointed star with Forbearance at its head.

"Now," Forbearance said, "everyone knows the blessin'. You says it after I read the ritual to draw down the stars. Remember, you has to be thinkin' 'bout Alexandra, not yourself. Anyone wishin' for herself - or himself - takes a leg out from the ritual, an' I don't think I formulated our position elegant enough to work with only five or four points."

Alexandra wondered about the theory behind all this. Forbearance had admitted that she was guessing and using received lore as much as Arithmancy and magical theory to calculate where they were supposed to stand and their proper positions beneath the rotating kaleidoscope of stars. And she had an ancient verse - which was somehow not 'doggerel verse' because it came from old books - whose stanzas were incomplete. Alexandra bet the words to this 'ritual' were likely some long-ago wizard's 'doggerel verse' that just happened to have been written down.

Forbearance had warned her about being too skeptical. The Stars Above might not know or care if the person trying to call on them doubted their existence, but she thought at the very least it might not be respectful.

Alexandra was skeptical. But she'd also done magic with less foundation for believing it would work.

"Are we'uns ready to start?" Forbearance asked.

Everyone nodded or made a sound of assent. Even Charlie cawed. Their lit wands shed enough light to make them clearly visible across Charmbridge's lawns. The bleachers and the hill would shield them from the school itself, but anyone in the woods or elsewhere within line of sight couldn't fail to see them. Alexandra knew there was no help for it if they were to stay within the supposed perimeter of protection around the school, but she didn't much like it.

And yet, she was going along with it, and so were all her friends.

Forbearance began reading. Anna was solemn and concerned as always. Constance was doubting and worried, but she was there to support her sister and Alexandra. David looked vaguely

embarrassed, but he raised his wand to Alexandra and smiled self-consciously. Innocence was radiant at being included. Sonja, too, was glowing by the light of her wand (and her hair), delighted at being accepted into Alexandra's circle of friends who went around doing mysterious, covert things.

Sonja and Forbearance had had to interpolate some of the words in the incantation Forbearance was about to recite. They had tried to explain to Alexandra the natal and horary calculations involved in determining which heavenly Powers to invoke by name; Alexandra just hoped it wouldn't all be for naught, if for no other reason than so Forbearance wouldn't feel foolish.

As Forbearance spoke the verses aloud, her careful enunciation retained barely a trace of her Ozarker accent:

"Occident and Orient, Pole and Anti-Pole,

stand at the four corners of land and deep and shoal.

Lie they all beneath the sky; there is no war or love

that seen by night, evades the sight, of th'eternal Stars Above.

By ev'ry Power in the sky, by Earth and Sun and Moon,

By Romulus and Sirius, by Pluto and Neptune;

By Kesil, Ash, and Kemah, by Jupiter and Mars,

I call to thee, my plea: convene the Parliament of Stars!"

Alexandra fixed her eyes on the stars while the last lines faded, wondering what was supposed to happen.

Nothing did.

After a long period of silence, Alexandra finally brought her gaze back to earth. Everyone was shifting uneasily, their eyes moving between the sky and Alexandra and each other.

Finally, David cleared his throat. "Guess it didn't work." He did not actually sound very disappointed, and Alexandra noticed that Anna was also trying to hide her relief.

Forbearance, however, was quite distraught. "I know I done said the words right! I know I did! An' we spent so long edzaktin' ever'thin' -"

Constance, who had ever been the critical one, walked over to put a comforting arm around her twin, while Innocence just scuffed her shoe in the dirt, obviously more disappointed than the others. Sonja tossed back her luminous red hair and sighed. "Well, we knew we were guessing about some parts. It was never a sure thing. But it would have been ash and elm if it had worked!"

They stood in place uncertainly, not sure whether it was all right to move. Then Charlie flew into the air and cawed a warning. Everyone froze, then scattered, regrouping on the other side of the bleachers. Charlie was difficult to see silhouetted against the night sky, but when the raven returned to her, it said: "Big fat jerk!"

"Who are you talking about, Charlie?" Alexandra asked.

Two figures stood at the top of the hill between the field where they were hiding and the school, lit from behind by the lights from Charmbridge Academy. They were tall and wore wide-brimmed hats, and instead of robes and cloaks, they were clothed in pants and thick jackets over long-sleeved shirts.

"Oh, no," Forbearance moaned.

"Benjamin and Mordecai," Alexandra said, in low, angry voice. She rose from where she'd been crouching, as did everyone else, now that it was clear that the Rashes had found them.

"We'uns saw you'uns sneakin' outside," Benjamin Rash said loudly. "We'uns watched what you'uns was about."

Alexandra snorted. "What were we about?"

Benjamin didn't answer her. All of the Pritchards, even Innocence, looked down at the ground.

"Constance, Forbearance, we'uns been real patient," said Mordecai.

"Too patient," said Benjamin. "You'uns hain't s'posed to be consortin' with them, but we overlooked it."

"Again with the 'them,'" David muttered.

Mordecai ignored him. "You won't shun 'em. An' we'uns never wished to make you'uns miserable."

"But now," his brother said, "you'uns are practicin' sorcery an' usin' Ozarker magic, too."

Forbearance gasped. "We hain't!"

"All this gallivantin' has to end," Benjamin said.

Alexandra took a step up the hill toward them. "Who the hell are you to tell them what they can and can't do?"

"We wasn't talkin' to you." Benjamin didn't look at her. "This is between us an' our kinfolk."

"They're my friends."

"You do a lot of speakin' for your friends," Mordecai said.

Forbearance pleaded: "Mordecai, Benjamin, please, don't be stirrin' no fraction."

"We hain't drawn our wands," Mordecai said.

Everyone's eyes darted about. Alexandra and David both had their wands clenched in tight fists. Anna was holding hers at her side, while Sonja's hand was thrust nervously into a pocket of her robes. The Rashes' hands were empty.

"Why don't you?" Alexandra asked, waving the tip of her wand up and down.

Benjamin finally turned his head in her direction, as if reluctant to acknowledge her.

"We'uns promised Constance and Forbearance not to start no ruckus with you," he said.

"That's convenient. You know you'd lose a fight, just like last time."

"Shut your mouth, Mudblood," Benjamin said.

In the shocked silence, Alexandra boiled with fury, but it was David who swore and cast a hex. The crackle of magic knocked Benjamin backward.

"David!" Constance gasped.

Everything was moving slowly to Alexandra. Benjamin was sitting on the ground. He put a hand to his face and it came away bloody. David pointed his wand at Mordecai, who had flinched when his brother fell but had not drawn his own wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Alexandra said, and David's wand flew from his hand. He yelped.

Constance walked past David and knelt next to Benjamin.

David shook his hand and knelt to retrieve his wand, with an indignant look at Alexandra. "You heard what he said!"

Mordecai said calmly, "How 'bout we tell the whole kittle to Dean Grimm, then? We can talk 'bout your conjurin', bringin' a seventh grader out after curfew-" He gestured at Innocence; " - an' how you cursed Benjamin when he hain't even drawn his wand."

Constance put a handkerchief to Benjamin's face. "What you said was abominable, Benjamin Rash. I won't abide you blackguardin' my friends like that."

"We'uns wasn't breakin' curfew or workin' Dark magic," Mordecai said.

"Dark magic?" Sonja exclaimed. "That's a lie! We weren't doing Dark Arts!"

"It hain't true," Forbearance said. "Mordecai, you know it hain't."

Alexandra sneered. "You figure we'll be punished worse for breaking curfew and cursing you than you will be for using the m-word? Fine - so we all get detention. I can live with that. How about you guys?"

Anna looked a lot unhappier than David or Sonja, but it was Constance and Forbearance who blanched.

There was something very unpleasant in Benjamin's expression. "We'uns don't care much 'bout detention - or expulsion, come to that. Let Dean Grimm pack us back to the Ozarks."

Alexandra looked from him to the trembling Pritchards. "Is that what will happen?" she asked. "If you get busted, your parents will pull you out of school?"

"You got no idea how far past the banks they gone," Benjamin said. "If their folks knew the half of it..."

"You creeps," Alexandra said. "You just wanted to get them in trouble."

"You'uns done that," Mordecai replied evenly. "We'uns didn't even draw wands."

"We'uns knew what to 'spect from someone of your breedin'," Benjamin said.

With an enraged growl, David moved toward him, but even before Alexandra could catch the back of his robes, Constance slapped Benjamin across the face. The loud noise froze everyone.

Benjamin put a hand to his face again and looked at Constance, who had put her own hand to her mouth.

With the greatest of efforts, Alexandra put her wand back in its sheath and pushed past David to face Mordecai, ignoring Benjamin. "Do you really hate me so much you'd ruin Constance and Forbearance and Innocence's education just to get back at me?"

Mordecai's expression was stony. "You reckon this is all 'bout you, don't you, Miss Quick?"

"We're tryin' to *protect* you," Benjamin said to Constance.

"We'uns don't need your protection," Constance said. "We hain't never asked for it."

"Your folks did. An' you'uns knew you was sowin' trouble. You'uns known it all along."

"You're such a big man," David said.

"What do you want from me?" Alexandra asked.

Mordecai's face remained as stiff as his posture. "We'uns don't want nothin' from you."

Benjamin rose to his feet and addressed the Pritchards. "You'uns sit with us at meals from now on. You don't study with Troublesome - or this... Muggle-born..." He gestured at David; "in the library or play games with 'em in the rec room, an' you don't go outside with 'em."

"What gnolls you are!" Sonja said. "Constance, Forbearance, are you going to let them treat you like this?"

Innocence mumbled something.

"An' you reg'lade that child," Benjamin added, pointing at Innocence.

"Why don't you put a leash around their necks?" David said. "Sounds like that's the way you prefer things in the Ozarks."

Constance and Forbearance cringed at that, and Alexandra realized that their humiliation did not come solely from Benjamin and Mordecai.

"Be quiet, David," she said. David bristled, but when she tilted her head toward the Pritchards, his gaze followed. He saw their downcast eyes and shamefaced expressions, and pressed his lips together angrily.

Alexandra walked over to Forbearance. "Would your parents really pull you out of school?"

Tears glistened in Forbearance's eyes as she nodded.

"All right," Alexandra said. "You do what you have to do to stay here at Charmbridge. I'll stay away from you."

"We'uns tried to let it be," Mordecai said. "You'uns brought this on yourselves."

"Shut up." Alexandra turned to face him. "You two are cowards and bullies. Someday, when my friends aren't around and you can't rat them out to get back at me, we'll have a *reckoning*, as you'uns call it."

For a moment, Alexandra thought - hoped - Mordecai would draw his wand. Then he held out his arm. Forbearance reached for it, slowly.

"This hain't 'bout you, Alexandra Quick," Mordecai said, "even if you think it is."

Benjamin took hold of Constance's arm, gently but firmly, while glaring at David. Bloody red blisters were splayed across his face. It was just a small curse, but an acutely painful one, Alexandra knew. But the Rashers were not unskilled at curses and counter-curses; David would never have been able to strike him down if Benjamin had had his wand out.

"We'll settle up someday, *boy*," Benjamin said.

David tensed; Alexandra was afraid she'd have to Stun one or both of them.

"Apologize," Constance said.

David and Benjamin both looked at her and said, "What?"

"You apologize, Benjamin Rash." Constance didn't resist his hold on her arm, but she stood stiffly, so that Benjamin could not move her without pulling her off her feet. "I told you I will not abide such hateful words."

Benjamin gestured at his blistered face. "He cursed me!"

"David oughtn't have done that. But you're lucky Alexandra didn't do worse." Constance didn't quite meet Benjamin's eyes. He slowly turned redder and redder. His fingers clenched her arm until it must have been almost bruising. Alexandra was itching to do something; she could see David was, too. But nobody moved or spoke.

Finally, Benjamin's head turned as if it were rotating on rusty clockwork gears until his eyes focused on David, Alexandra, and Anna. They burned with hatred and he practically spat out: "I 'pologize for my rough words. I oughtn't have spoke like that."

There was a tense silence. Then David said, "Fine. For Constance and Forbearance's sake."

"Whatever," Anna mumbled.

"I accept your apology," Alexandra said through gritted teeth. Then she added, "If you hurt my friends, I'll make you sorrier."

Constance and Forbearance winced, but then they were walking downhill with the Rashes.

"Come 'long, Innocence," Forbearance said softly.

Innocence slunk between Alexandra and David. She paused and looked at Alexandra. "You hain't the only one got secrets," she said, then followed her sisters back toward the academy.

Bespoke

Constance and Forbearance sat with the Rashes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and only spoke with their friends in class or in the girls' dorm in the evenings. Innocence, as if to prove that she was not so strictly controlled, began walking in the hallways with William again, having finally forgiven him for throwing their Halloween duel.

David was even more outraged than Alexandra at Constance's and Forbearance's meek compliance with their enforced segregation, and complained constantly about the situation.

Finally, Alexandra asked him over breakfast, "What exactly do you think you can do?" David had been casting dark looks in the Ozarkers' direction all morning and muttering about the Rashes.

"We need to stand by C and F," he said. "Let 'em know their friends got their backs."

"Maybe they need to know their friends won't publicly embarrass them or make things worse for them," Alexandra said.

"I seem to remember having this conversation with you last year," Anna said, while scraping some eggs off her plate.

"So, we just let those two ignorant rednecks keep Constance and Forbearance in a cage?" David asked.

"Maybe you should go curse Benjamin and Mordecai," Alexandra said. "That usually works well. Just make sure you do it when there are enough people around to save you from getting trounced and hexed afterward."

David's mouth opened, but all the air seemed to go out of him. Without saying another word, he rose to his feet, picked up his tray, and walked away.

"Ouch," said Anna.

Alexandra put her elbows on the table and rested her forehead against her knuckles. "I probably shouldn't have said that."

"It was kind of mean." After a pause, Anna added, "But true."

David didn't eat with them after that, and in class, he barely spoke to Alexandra at all. Even the Pritchards commented on this, while seated next to Alexandra and Anna.

"You do somethin' to vex David?" Constance asked.

"She hurt his feelings," Anna said.

"I bruised his ego," Alexandra said.

Constance *tsked*. "You gots to be gentler with boys, Alex. They can't take much."

Alexandra kept her retort to herself.

Her guilt was tempered by annoyance. All right, maybe she had picked fights she shouldn't have, too. But she told herself that she didn't pick fights she knew she couldn't win.

It had been over two weeks since she'd summoned Quimley, and the elf had not returned. She was beginning to worry about him. She thought about summoning him again, just to make sure he was okay, but what if that turned out to be another inconvenience just to tell her that he had nothing to tell her? Wouldn't it seem like she was checking up on him? She was pretty sure Quimley could visit her at will. Maybe he had to return to the Lands Below. He certainly couldn't spend *all* his time running an errand for her. She resigned herself to be patient and wait.

Forbearance had not given up on calling upon the Stars Above. She and Sonja continued working on astrological charts and occasionally asking Alexandra seemingly irrelevant questions like "Do you do more magic in the morning or evening?" and "What colors do you wear in the winter?" Alexandra wasn't sure when or how they planned to attempt another ritual, but she humored Forbearance and focused on her own studies.

She wasn't invited to Croatoa for Thanksgiving, but she was hoping she might see the Kings over the winter break. Those hopes were dashed by a letter from Julia informing her that Ms. King suggested waiting until the summer.

"It is so terribly unfair, Alexandra," Julia wrote. *"She didn't say as much, but I know she's punishing us for our little misadventure. I*

suppose she has concluded that keeping us apart is the only punishment she can inflict upon you, but it's simply awful! Sometimes my mother is so horribly unreasonable I can't even bear speaking to her! I'm sure I will hardly say a word to her this Thanksgiving, unless she changes her mind about letting you visit over the winter holiday."

Julia had danced with a boy named Quentin at the Salem Halloween Ball, and she was now exchanging letters with him. She denied that this was anything more than a casual correspondence, but the number of exclamation points in her letter made Alexandra doubtful. Of course Julia asked her about Payton, too.

Letters from Payton had been trailing off a bit, while containing a wistful tone Alexandra found annoying. She tried to write regularly, but what could she talk about besides her classes and school activities? She mentioned her friends (Payton was curious about Chinese and Ozarker witches, but seemed particularly curious about David, especially when she mentioned that he was also a Muggle-born wizard and that his father was a football player), and JROC and the Dueling Club. She very casually mentioned almost winning the Charmbridge Dueling Championship, and was surprised by how much importance Payton seemed to read into that:

"I'm sure you'll beat this Larry guy next year, but you said he's older, right, so why are you so upset that he beat you or that he wins in your dueling club matches? You sure seem bugged about him LOL! Hey, I thought I'd learn to duel myself, except we only get Magical Self Defense classes like a couple times a month at my school. But I checked out some books so I'll practice with you next time you visit, OK? We can help each other get better."

She wrote back that she probably wouldn't return to Roanoke until the summer.

Even if she could have told Payton about what was really happening in her life - the Pritchards and the Rashes, John Manuelito's murder attempts, the Stars Above - these were things she couldn't trust to owls. She wrote a letter promising to call him when she got home for Christmas and sent the owl on its way.

Constance and Forbearance were not able to sit with their friends even for the Thanksgiving Feast. Alexandra and Anna sat with Sonja and Carol, while David kept to the boys' end of the table. He still

wasn't speaking to Alexandra. Alexandra forced herself to be cheerful and enjoy the company of the other girls, wondering if she would lose their companionship as well.

November turned into December. Alexandra spent almost all her free time in the library with Anna. Her classmates were amazed: Alexandra Quick was turning into a wyrm! Her teachers were amazed: she was attentive and diligent in class. She was determined to ace the SPAWN and her final exams at the end of the semester.

The Dueling Club meeting before finals week was her last chance to beat Larry before the end of the year. She had dueled him every Friday for months, and lost every single time. She had come close to winning more than once, and she thought she was coming closer each time, but Larry didn't seem worried at all.

They had more spectators than usual that afternoon. Anna wasn't there, having told Alexandra weeks ago that she wasn't going to come watch her get beaten up every Friday. Neither were the Pritchards, but Alexandra didn't expect them. She also didn't expect David, who had barely spoken to her in a month, but he stood with Dylan, watching each match.

To Alexandra's surprise, it was not Larry who challenged her, but Sonja. Each person could only accept one challenge, so Larry was annoyed, and looked at Alexandra suspiciously. She gave him a smirk and raised her wand in a gesture that said: "You're next." She could still challenge him. He sat back to watch next to some blonde witch who had replaced Bathsheba.

Alexandra didn't know what Sonja was thinking - she was no match for Alexandra. As they stepped up onto the platform together, Sonja whispered, "Can you do something that looks really painful without being, you know, too painful?"

Alexandra was flabbergasted. "What?"

Sonja eyes darted around as they reached the top of the steps. "Make it look good," she whispered.

"You're *planning* to lose?"

"Of course not." Much louder, Sonja said, "Don't underestimate me, Alexandra."

Sonja wasn't good enough to throw a duel without being obvious, and she fought Alexandra as hard as she could, mostly with Stunning Charms and Disarming Jinxes. Alexandra blocked them while trying not to make it look too easy, and then when Sonja was at the point of committing to another jinx, cast a Nordic Reversal that flipped her opponent head over heels and sent her bouncing across the platform, head and shoulders and behind striking the planks one after the other. She sprawled in a heap of tangled robes and disheveled red hair, groaning loudly.

The spectators murmured, and Ms. Shirliffe's eyes narrowed. Alexandra's spell had been legal, but it was much more violent than necessary. Everyone in the club knew Alexandra could beat Sonja easily, so the trouncing had the appearance of vindictiveness.

Alexandra wondered why she'd done as Sonja wished; it looked as if her 'friend' had set her up.

"Someone take Rackham to the infirmary," Ms. Shirliffe said.

Sonja struggled to a sitting position and reached a hand out. "Oh, Matthew, won't you help me, please?" Matthew Prester started, then stepped forward and slipped an arm around her to help her off the platform. She put her arms around his neck and limped as if she could barely walk, hobbling with him toward the academy. Over her shoulder, she gave Alexandra a wink.

That's *why she wanted me to flatten her*? Alexandra thought, with a great deal of annoyance.

"Go ahead, Quick, get it over with," Ms. Shirliffe said. Alexandra realized the teacher meant for Alexandra to issue her own challenge while she was already up on the platform. She pointed her wand at Larry, who was already strutting up the steps.

"You're doing the same thing over and over," Shirliffe said in a low voice, strolling close enough so only Alexandra could hear.

"That's how you get better, isn't it, ma'am?"

"You think you're going to win this time?" Shirliffe asked.

"Yes."

Shirtliffe stepped back and waved her wand. Alexandra and Larry began exchanging hexes immediately.

Alexandra had gotten better in the past couple of months - she knew she had. She was sure she could have beaten Larry on Halloween if she'd fought him without the rules limiting them here on the dueling platform. She tried timing her attacks between his. She had gotten good at memorizing the patterns of other dueling club members, but Larry didn't fall into a pattern as readily.

She scorched his leg, and realized an instant too late he hadn't deflected that hex because she couldn't move her wand quickly enough after casting it. He said "*Expelliarmus!*" and her wand flew from her hand.

She was furious. She hadn't been Disarmed in a year. Disarming Charms only worked against beginners or someone caught completely by surprise. It was the worst way to lose a duel.

Larry leveled his wand at her. Technically, the duel wasn't over until she was incapacitated or she yielded. Usually, being Disarmed was assumed to end a duel, but Larry wanted to make her surrender.

She faced him and didn't move. Whatever spell he threw at her would be preferable to saying 'I yield.'

"That was hexed, dropping Rackham on her head like that," Larry said. He hesitated, then let his hand drop. "You don't even make it fun anymore to beat you." He turned and walked off the platform.

"Match," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "Albo wins." She looked with disapproval at Alexandra. "Being too proud to accept defeat after you've picked a fight you can't win isn't admirable, Quick."

With those words, Alexandra was left to stew in humiliation until open dueling was over and the audience dispersed along with the rest of the dueling club.

Two spectators lingered. "Man, you really are a dueling fiend," Dylan said. "But Albo made you his -"

"Shut up, Dylan," David said. He regarded Alexandra warily. "That smack-down you gave Sonja was pretty cold."

"Did you lose eagles on me again?" she asked. "Or did you bet on Larry this time?"

"No." David shrugged. "Just came to watch." He and Dylan drifted off. Part of Alexandra wanted to call after him and walk with them back to the school, and part of her refused to yield. Pride won, and she watched them walk away.

Late Sunday night, the last Sunday before everyone would go home for the winter break, Constance and Forbearance knocked at Alexandra and Anna's door. Boys weren't permitted in Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall, so the Rashes couldn't prevent the Pritchards from visiting with Alexandra there.

Alexandra quickly admitted them. No one said anything for a while as Alexandra and Anna sat on the edge of their beds, and Constance and Forbearance sat in chairs, hands folded in their laps.

Finally, Alexandra couldn't take the silence any longer.

"I know whatever is up with you and the Rashes isn't my business. And I know you have your culture and things I don't understand. But tell me what I can do to make your parents stop hating me so much. Is it just that I'm Abraham Thorn's daughter?" She glanced at Anna. Anna's father had come to terms with her being a friend of the Enemy's daughter, but it had not been easy.

"Our Ma and Pa don't hate you, Alexandra," Constance said.

"They don't know you," Forbearance said.

"Then why did they forbid you to be friends with me?"

"They didn't percisely."

"Then tell me precisely what I should do. I'm sorry, I just can't stand watching those two... blaggards treat you like that."

The twins looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

Alexandra looked from them to Anna, who was also smiling. "What?"

"Blaggard?" Constance repeated, while Forbearance laughed.

"When did you start talking like an Old Colonial?" asked Anna.

"I figured it was better than the word I wanted to use," Alexandra said.

The Pritchards became more serious, though Forbearance's eyes still twinkled with amusement.

"Alex, dear, Benjamin an' Mordecai hain't gullymogs," Forbearance said.

"Really?" Alexandra folded her arms. "So you don't mind being talked to like you're little children who have to obey them?"

"Yes, we'uns do mind it. We minds it very much," Constance said. "We'uns done talked to them 'bout that."

"Mordecai even apologized for shamin' us," Forbearance said.

"Benjamin didn't," Constance muttered.

"So you can hang out with me after all?"

The twins fell silent again.

Alexandra sighed. She didn't understand, and she was afraid of trying to pry more out of them. But they seemed to want to tell her something, so she waited.

"We'uns owe you an explanation," Constance said.

"You don't."

"We do." Forbearance chewed her lip. "But it hain't easy to 'splain 'cause your'n ways is different an'... we'uns don't want the whole school speakin' more fur 'bout Ozarkers."

"An' our 'primitive, superstitious' -"

" - backwards customs."

"But you know we don't think that way," Anna said.

The twins sighed together.

"Ozarkers don't percisely believe in astrology," Forbearance said.

"We'uns don't believe in it *at all*," Constance said. The corners of Forbearance's mouth tightened slightly. "But we do believe in signs an' portents."

"Like fortune telling?" Alexandra regretted saying that when the Pritchards winced.

"No, not like fortune tellin' 't all," Constance said. "Like prophesies an' Naming an' Mysteries an' special ways of knowin' -"

"It hain't no different from astrology an' numerology an' other 'ologies," Forbearance said, "ceptin' Connie don't agree with me." For a moment, that invisible tension between the twins filled the room again, and then Forbearance continued. "Anyhow, there's power in certain combinations an' patterns, like numbers an' Names an' births -"

" - and twins," said Constance.

"Certain things can only come 'bout when the right people does the right things in the right order," Forbearance said.

Alexandra and Anna looked at each other.

"I'm lost," Alexandra said.

"Me, too," Anna said.

The Pritchards blushed and fidgeted. Then Forbearance spoke, in a quiet voice. "Connie and me is bespoke."

Alexandra and Anna were speechless for several long moments. Then Anna said, "Does that mean...?"

Alexandra managed to sound only a little less shocked: "Are you *engaged*?"

What had her great-great-great-great-grandfather told her? At one time, it was not unusual for girls her age to marry. But even Old Colonials didn't marry at fourteen anymore - or so she thought.

"We'uns hain't percisely betrothed," Forbearance said.

"Just bespoke," Constance said.

"What's the difference?" Alexandra tried to keep the sick feeling she felt out of her voice. Her friends *married* to Benjamin and Mordecai Rash? Anna's face did not conceal her horror.

"We'uns allowed that it's a proper match," Constance said.

"So we'uns consented to let 'em court us in apperhension of askin' for our hands at the proper time," Forbearance said.

"But definitely not 'til after we finish educatin'."

"We'uns was very firm on that."

"Our Ma an' Pa agreed, too."

Alexandra was still trying to wrap her mind around this. "So, they haven't actually asked you to marry them, but you agreed to let them ask you after you graduate - does that mean you've promised you'll say yes?"

Constance and Forbearance looked at each other before answering.

"It means," Forbearance said slowly, "that it's expected we'll say yes."

"That's how everyone understands it," Constance said.

"How do you understand it?" Anna asked.

The twins were silent.

Alexandra leaned forward. "You don't really *want* to marry them, do you? Do you have to? Is this like an arranged marriage thing where your parents decide who you'll marry?"

Constance said, "It hain't that simple, Alexandra."

"Plenty of couples consent to a match 'cause it's suitable, a'fore they really knows each other," Forbearance said.

"Our Ma and Pa did."

"An' they have ten children now."

Alexandra wasn't sure what that proved. She looked at Anna, but to her surprise, Anna was nodding. "Chinese wizards usually use matchmakers, too, and consult their ancestors. It shocked everyone when my father married a Muggle."

"So a matchmaker tells you who to marry?" Alexandra asked, trying to keep her indignation in check.

"No," Anna said, "a matchmaker *advises* you."

Alexandra turned back to the Pritchards. "But you don't even like Benjamin and Mordecai! They're bigots, they're chauvinist pigs, they treat you like - well, badly..."

"They're mean," Anna said.

The twins looked down. Then Forbearance said, "We'uns can't deny any of that, Alex. It's true, every bit of it."

"But they'uns is tryin'," Constance said.

Forbearance sighed. "They try. An' they're just boys. In a few years, maybe they'll be more mannerly."

Alexandra asked, "What happens if you decide you don't want to marry them in a few years?"

After a pause, Constance said, "We'uns can say no."

"But... it'd kick a right row," Forbearance said.

"A great multitude o' folks would be terrible disappointed, not just our folks."

"Whose business is it besides your family?" Alexandra asked.

"It's like we said, Alex. There's signs an' portents, an' twins marryin' twins is a powerful conjunction..."

"Your fellow Ozarkers, they want you to marry the Rashes just because you're twins? That's -" Alexandra started to say 'stupid', and when the Pritchards flinched as if already wounded by her words, she amended: "It doesn't make sense to me."

"Well," Constance said, "it don't have to make no sense to you, now does it?"

Constance's tone was gentle, but Alexandra still felt slapped as soundly as Benjamin Rash. She sat back on her bed. Anna remained troubled but quiet.

Forbearance said, "Anyhow, we'uns thought you'uns oughter know."

"Why is it a big secret?" Anna asked.

The twins were quiet. Then Constance said, "How Alexandra took it is how we're feared everyone'll take it."

Forbearance spoke with a slight edge of uncharacteristic bitterness. "Them poor jakey gals who ain't got no head o' their own."

"An' everyone knows Ozarkers is simple hillbillies," Constance said.

"I don't think that," Alexandra said.

More softly, Forbearance said, "Can you accept things as they is, even if'n you don't like it?"

Alexandra tried to force the tension out of her posture and her voice. "I'll try. But it sounds like you're already forbidden from being our friends. I guess after you... marry them, we'll never see you again." That prospect, as distant as it seemed, filled her with hurt.

"Alexandra Quick," Constance scolded. "Didn't we'uns promise we'll always be your friends?"

"Anyhow," Forbearance said, "you'uns don't need to be frettin' 'bout us when you got your future to worry 'bout."

"But we'uns is workin' on that," Constance said. "Astrologically an' otherwise." She and Forbearance exchanged another look, but declined to explain further.

Alexandra spent every evening the last week of classes in the library. She had gone to see Mr. Calvert, Dean of the Ninth Grade, about moving to a more advanced Magical Theory class in January. He told her he would allow it if and only if she received a Superior score on the Magical Theory portion of her end-of-year SPAWN *and* perfect grades in all of her classes.

This seemed like an unfair requirement to her: she only wanted to skip levels in one class! But Dean Calvert had been unmovable, and Alexandra knew better than to try to appeal to Dean Grimm.

She wasn't a bad student, but neither was she usually very diligent, and she had never gotten straight 'A's in her life. She was not worried about her Charms or Transfiguration grades - she was the best in the class, at least in practical spellcasting - and Herbology was easy, but her Confederation Citizenship class threatened to undo her ambitions.

She found Confederation Citizenship as boring as all her other wizarding social studies classes had been, and thus had put her usual mediocre effort into the class. Now, she suddenly had to raise her mid-term grade, which meant not only acing the final exam, but also coming up with a Citizenship Project, which contrary to Mrs. Middle's advice, she had not even thought about the entire semester.

Most students conducted some sort of fundraiser to send books and wands to young witches and wizards in 'uncivilized countries,' or visited elderly witches and warlocks at the Queen of Chicago Sanatorium, or performed other service projects over the winter or spring breaks. Everyone had to submit their intended project to Mrs. Middle by the last day of the semester, and the teacher said that projects that showed 'originality, exceptional effort, and a truly civic-minded spirit' would be weighed in their favor when she was recording their semester grades.

Considering all the homework assignments and quizzes which Alexandra had skipped or completed sloppily, she needed all the favorable weight she could get. The fact that she was anything but 'civic-minded' toward the Confederation did not make it easy for her to think of something suitably original and exceptional.

Anna's father had endless opportunities for his daughter to demonstrate her civic-mindedness back in California, and Anna said she'd ask the Congressman if he could do anything for his

daughter's friend. Alexandra had no idea what she could do in Larkin Mills that would count as service to the Confederation. She hated the assignment and she hated the idea of it, but she needed an 'A.' That meant she couldn't just sign up for one of the 'volunteer opportunities' Mrs. Middle made available for students who had no better ideas. She had to really impress the bothersome old witch.

Seated at a back corner table, Alexandra saw David as he sneaked out of the room behind the librarian's office carrying a couple of old books. When he saw her, his expression was that of someone caught in a furtive act.

She just watched him, and after a moment's pause, he strolled over to her table, trying to look casual.

"Where's Anna?" he asked.

"Arithmancy study group," she said. "She'll be here soon."

He looked down at her book. "*Magic in the Days of Merlin?* What class is that for?"

"No class. It doesn't mention Powers directly, but it hints that Merlin and Morgan and some of the other old-time wizards dealt with them a lot more than we do now."

"Uh huh."

David held his books clutched to his stomach, and made no move to show them to her. The silence stretched between them. Alexandra thought about the acrimonious words she had flung at him weeks ago, and Constance's admonition.

She broke the silence first. "What've you got there?"

He hesitated, then sat down and showed her the books.

"*Central Territory Wizard Senate Proceedings: 1932-1933. Confederation Census Records, 1875-1900.*" She gave him an odd look. "That looks like really interesting reading." She lowered her voice. "Are you researching... you know?"

"The eathly-day egiment-ray?" he whispered. "No."

She rolled her eyes. "Seriously? Pig Latin? Wait, if you're not looking for... that, then why are you reading old books like this, and -" She narrowed her eyes. "Where'd you get them?"

"I'm looking up old laws for my Citizenship Project."

"Oh." She waited, but he didn't volunteer anything else, so she said, "Those books don't look like they came from the regular stacks."

"Bran and Poe helped me," he said. "You're the one who told me I should actually *talk* to elves about ASPEW."

"Did you?"

"Um, a little. Not much. They kind of get upset when you start talking about..."

"The f-word."

"Yeah. And they insist they love their 'bookses' so much they'd never want to do anything else." He shook his head. "It's sad. They're totally brainwashed."

"Maybe they really are happy."

"Yeah, them slaves sho' do love they work."

His vicious sarcasm made her flinch. "Come on, David. Are you accusing me of being in favor of slavery?"

"Well, you haven't exactly been supporting ASPEW. And how many house-elves do you and your sister have waiting on you at Croatoa, again?"

She gave him an unblinking stare.

He looked away first. "I'm just sayin'."

"Did you enjoy the Halloween and Thanksgiving feasts?" she asked. They both knew that Charmbridge's kitchen elves spent many hours preparing those feasts. "How did you find out about Bran and Poe, anyway?"

"From C and F." He pulled the books back across the table toward himself. "So, uh, can I study with you?"

"Study with me?"

"Am I bothering you?"

She reopened her book. David had hardly talked to her in a month, and she wasn't going to apologize.

"Why did you beat down Sonja like that?" he asked. "I thought you're friends."

"She asked me to."

"She asked you to beat her up?" he repeated skeptically.

"Yes." She did not elaborate, and waited for him to either say something else or let her read.

He sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets as he slouched in his chair. Finally, he said, "You really do think I'm a wuss, don't you?"

"What?" This took her off-guard.

"Did you know Constance and Forbearance know how to duel?"

"They do?" Now she had almost forgotten being annoyed at him.

"Where do you think Innocence learned? Apparently, it's not just Ozarker boys who learn to duel when they're little. Girls just do it in secret, and they don't call it dueling."

"Innocence told you this?"

"She also told me about C and F being engaged to the Rashes."

"They're not exactly engaged." Alexandra frowned. "So you're prying info out of Innocence?"

"Well, since apparently none of my friends will tell me this stuff..." He fidgeted, hands still stuck in his pockets, as Alexandra folded her arms. Then he said, "I want to learn to duel."

She blinked. "Why?"

"So when those two rednecks start talking crap, I can step up to them."

"You step up to them now."

"Yeah, and you think I'm -"

"David," she said, "I don't think you're a wuss. But learning to duel so you can fight the Rashes is a stupid idea."

"Why?"

"Training just to beat someone up won't work."

"Really? I thought you're in the Dueling Club 'cause you want to beat Larry."

"I -" A hint of uncertainty bled into her denial. "That's not true. I just want to be the best."

"Can you teach me how to duel?"

"Me?" She stared at him. "Join the Dueling Club. Ms. Shirtliffe will teach you."

"You learned tricks from your brother that Ms. Shirtliffe doesn't teach."

"She says they've made me worse at dueling."

He frowned, unconvinced.

"Who are you trying to impress?" she asked. "Suppose you did beat Benjamin and Mordecai in a duel. What would it prove? Do you think they'd stop thinking of us as Mudbloods?"

"Funny how that doesn't stop you from drawing *your* wand." He thumped his fist on the table. "Everyone knows you beat them both last year. You can beat almost anyone except the seniors, and Larry. Those hicks are afraid of you, but they think I'm nothing."

"I don't think they're afraid of me." Alexandra grabbed his fist before he thumped the table again. "If you really want to practice dueling, I'll practice with you. But honestly? Unless you're really good, you're not going to beat Benjamin and Mordecai."

"You're really good."

She shrugged.

"It kind of sucks that even girls are better than me."

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, '*even* girls'?"

"I didn't mean it like that," he stammered.

"How did you mean it?"

"I just meant - look, I'm sorry about getting pissed off at you."

"You're really a jerk sometimes."

"Takes one to know one," he retorted.

They sat in silence, glaring at each other.

"What if you have to choose between dueling and Quidditch?" Alexandra asked at last.

He frowned. "I don't know."

"Well, make up your mind by January, and join the Dueling Club if you're serious about dueling. And if you want to practice wizard-dueling with me, it's going to hurt. A lot. Especially if you keep making comments about how much it sucks that girls are better than you."

He nodded.

"Now go away," she said. "I'm studying."

"Wyrms." He stood up. "So, uh, are we cool?"

"Do you want a hug?" she asked, without looking up.

He snorted and walked away.

On the last day of class before their SPAWNs, Alexandra had her proposed Citizenship Project written on the best parchment she could find in her neatest handwriting. She handed it to Mrs. Middle

and sat down to take the final exam, for which she'd stayed up all night studying.

She felt pretty confident when time was up. She and Anna had reviewed the difference between Territorial Senates and the Wizards' Congress. She knew how Governors were selected and how the Governor-General was appointed, and she didn't miss the question about the special powers under which Governor-General Hucksteen had extended his term in office. She had identified the rules for Cultural Exemptions.

She just hoped that boring, unimaginative Mrs. Middle would take her Citizenship Project seriously.

Final exams in her other classes were not all easy, but she felt better about her performance than she ever had before. Now there was just the SPAWN to get through. She was barely paying attention during the last JROC drill of the year until Ms. Shirtliffe held them a little later than usual and made them stand in formation, even as a few snowflakes began drifting down, the first snow of the season.

Ms. Shirtliffe called three names: "Witch-Private Quick, Mage-Private First Class Panos, and Witch-Corporal Barker, front and center!"

The three of them broke out of formation and marched to the front. Alexandra wondered if she was in trouble. Theo Panos had been acting like his usual asinine self, but she hadn't been up to anything, and Charlotte was never in trouble.

Witch-Colonel Shirtliffe wore her stiff, creased blue and gray Regimental Officer Corps uniform, with a black cape. She stood before the three Junior Officers and said, "Most promotions wait until the end of the school year, but you three have earned mid-term promotions, for your time in your current rank, dedication, and mastery of your duties."

Alexandra barely heard the speech Shirtliffe gave before affixing a pin to her collar. Witch-Sergeant Barker, Mage-Corporal Panos, and Witch-Private First Class Quick stood at attention while the rest of the JROC cheered and applauded.

After they were dismissed, Ms. Shirtliffe clapped a hand on Alexandra's shoulder, preventing her from leaving. "What did you do this time, Quick?"

Alexandra turned around, baffled. "What do you mean, ma'am?"

The uniformed teacher held up a bit of flapping parchment. "You've been summoned to the Dean's office. I'm going to be very disappointed if you've gotten yourself into trouble again just when I decided to give you the promotion you should have gotten last year."

"I haven't done anything, ma'am. I don't know what this is about." Alexandra eyed the parchment.

"Well, you'd better go and see."

Alexandra hurried inside, wondering what she could have done to warrant a summons to the Dean's office.

The administrative wing was crowded at this time of year. Many students were coming to see deans to appeal grades assigned during the semester, defend themselves against accusations of cheating, or request schedule changes. There was a line of students in front of Miss Marmsley's portrait, and when Alexandra reached the front, the school secretary was too busy to look down her nose at her. She merely said, "The Dean is downstairs at the moment. Go wait on the bench. She'll see you in a few minutes."

Alexandra walked down the hall to the bench in front of the Dean's office. Dean Price hurried past with a large iron box floating behind her. "Excuse me, Miss Quick," she said brusquely. The box had a gargoyle face engraved into one end of it which leered and stuck a wrought-iron tongue out at Alexandra as it floated after the Assistant Dean.

Alexandra looked around the hallway rather than sitting down. Old photographs of Charmbridge Academy, past teachers, and famous alumni hung there, along with plaques for awards students had won over the years.

There was another girl already sitting on the bench in front of the Dean's office door - a little sixth grader with black hair in dreadlocks, wearing velvety red robes. She was trying very hard not cry, and looked as if she were going to be ill.

Alexandra wondered what the girl had done. Something serious, if Dean Grimm was seeing her instead of Dean Price.

"Don't worry," she said, "Dean Grimm isn't actually that bad."

The girl turned her face up toward Alexandra, and her wide, fearful eyes shined hopefully. Either the younger girl didn't recognize her, or she was more terrified of the Dean than she was of the notorious daughter of the Enemy. "Really? I've never been in trouble before, I swear! I'm a good witch! Those cookies weren't my fault - I didn't mean for anyone to actually *eat* them!"

Alexandra wasn't sure what to say to that.

The girl's eyes darted around, then she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Everyone says the Dean turns students into animals to punish them. That isn't true, is it?"

Alexandra hesitated. "I don't think she does it very often."

The girl's eyes went wide again. Just then, Alexandra caught movement at the end of the hallway. There was a black cat standing at the foot of the stairs.

The girl saw the cat, too. She sniffled and wiggled her fingers. "Here, kitty, kitty."

"That's the Dean's cat," Alexandra said.

The girl put her hands over her mouth.

"It's just a cat." Alexandra walked over to Galen. "You're a troublesome cat."

Galen meowed at her but didn't object to being picked up. The cat purred in her arms, and Alexandra was about to turn back to the girl on the bench when she looked up the stairs and saw a closed door at the top. She could just make out the letters printed on the door: 'Registrar's Office.'

She looked around again. No other deans were outside their offices. The girl on the bench was hunched over with her face in her hands.

Without spending any time to think about what she was doing, Alexandra walked quickly upstairs. She looked down the hall at the

top of the stairs and saw no one, though she could hear voices through a couple of open doors.

The Registrar's Scroll was behind the door in front of her. *It will only take a minute - in and out.* She set Galen down and drew her wand, shushing the cat as it meowed at her. She tested the door to the Registrar's Office, found it locked, and opened it with an Unlocking Charm, just as she had three years earlier.

Galen stood in the doorway, tail held high, as Alexandra slid inside and reached up to the shelf where the wooden case containing the Registrar's Scroll sat. She was just able to reach it. She dragged it off the shelf and set it down on the small table that was the only piece of furniture in the room besides the counters and bookshelves.

She lifted the lid off the plain wooden box and found the large roll of parchment spooled between two wooden spindles. She took the scroll out of its case and set it on the table. The names on the parchment were barely visible in the light falling on it from the half-open door.

She glanced again down the hallway, then whispered, "Show me Livia Pruett, Class of... um, I don't know."

She wasn't sure what would happen if she didn't specify the year, or if there had been more than one Livia Pruett enrolled at Charmbridge Academy, but the scroll began spooling quickly. Names and years flew past: 2005...2000...1995... then it slowed and came to a halt halfway through the class of 1994. There was the name in black and white: 'Livia Justina Pruett.'

It had been foolish to take this risk just to satisfy her curiosity on a hunch, but Alexandra felt a strange sense of vindication. So she was not the first daughter of Abraham Thorn to attend Charmbridge Academy.

She was about to put the scroll away, but hesitated. "Show me... Claudia Carolina Quick."

She held her breath, waiting for the scroll to move. But it didn't.

So much for that, she thought. Every second increased her risk, but she couldn't resist one more: "Show me Lilith Grimm."

She had no idea whether Dean Grimm had attended Charmbridge. But the scroll moved. It rolled backward several years from Livia's class, and revealed the name 'Lilith Tisiphone Grimm.'

"Huh." Alexandra leaned closer. The names above and below Lilith Grimm were 'Morgan Thomas Greeves' and 'Geryon Heathcliff Grimmald.'

"Show me Diana Alecto Grimm," she said.

The scroll didn't move.

Had Diana gone to a different school? Maybe her sister was the smart one.

She put the scroll back into its case and set the case back on the shelf, then exited the Registrar's Office, locking the door behind her. Galen darted between her legs as she hurried downstairs. Her heart raced and she was flushed with excitement, as she always was when getting away with something. It had been a stupid thing to do, a spontaneous impulse, but -

The sixth grader was gone. Alexandra crept back to the bench and saw light through the opaque glass in the door. She sat down and waited. Galen jumped up into her lap. Surprised, Alexandra stroked the cat.

After several minutes, the little girl opened the door, face miserable and eyes swollen. Dean Grimm was standing behind her, wearing black robes like an executioner. Trembling, the girl walked away without a word or a glance in Alexandra's direction.

"Miss Quick," said the Dean, "you were not here when I admitted Miss Dupree into my office."

"I was around the corner, getting Galen." Alexandra rose to her feet. "Ma'am."

She worried a little about Ms. Grimm's narrowed gaze. Then the Dean extended her arms and took Galen from her. "When you're told to wait outside my office, that does not mean wander up and down the hallway because you're bored." She said nothing as she walked back into the office.

Alexandra followed her, and stood at attention in front of the Dean's massive desk. Ms. Grimm sat down and inspected Alexandra's JROC uniform for a moment. "Do you know why you're here, Miss Quick?"

"No, ma'am. I really don't."

The Dean held up a piece of parchment that had been sitting half-curved on her desk. Alexandra recognized her own handwriting on it. It was her Citizenship Project proposal.

Ms. Grimm said, "Mrs. Middle sent this to me because she believed that this was your idea of a joke. I am inclined to think that in typical adolescent fashion, having mastered the art of simple sarcasm, you're now experimenting with the more aggravating possibilities of passive-aggressiveness. But I fear you may be serious."

"It's not a joke, ma'am. I am serious."

Ms. Grimm read from the parchment: "I will perform a valuable service to the Confederation by locating a dangerous criminal who was expelled from Charmbridge Academy for practicing Dark Arts and who is now a member of the Dark Convention. I intend to locate and bring to justice the Dark Wizard John Manuelito."

A pointed silence followed.

"Should I bake cookies instead?" Alexandra asked. "I think HAGGIS is holding a fundraiser."

"You've become entirely too comfortable displaying your sharp tongue with me, Miss Quick." The Dean set the parchment down and smoothed it against the surface of her desk with long, polished nails. "I haven't assigned any pig detentions for a long time. Too many parental complaints. But that was before the WODAMND Act - now I have parents complaining that I've become too soft. And of course, your mother will hardly complain."

Alexandra thought about 'pig detention,' and kept her mouth shut.

The Dean tapped the parchment. "Did you honestly think this was a good idea?"

"I told you, ma'am, I'm serious."

Ms. Grimm closed her eyes for a moment, and let out a breath as she leaned back in her chair. Her hands slid off the table to her familiar, who was still sitting in her lap. "Miss Quick, your arrogance and lack of foresight will be your undoing. Had you thought this through, surely you would have realized that no adult at this school is going to approve of fourteen-year-olds hunting Dark Wizards."

"I've done a lot of things no one would have approved of, or thought I could do. And I'm going to find John Manuelito, whether or not Mrs. Middle approves it for my Citizenship Project."

The Dean's expression, which had become just a little bit softer, hardened again. Alexandra hurried out the rest of her words: "He's been trying to kill me, and no one else is doing anything. He seduced Darla! He joined the Dark Convention and I saw him in Chicago -"

"That's enough. Do you have proof of any of this, Miss Quick? How do you intend to find John Manuelito?"

Alexandra said nothing.

"What exactly was your plan?" The Dean's tone compelled an answer.

"I can't tell you, ma'am."

"You mean you won't tell me."

"I haven't done anything wrong! If I have to propose another Citizenship Project - that's not fair!" Alexandra realized that if her proposal wasn't approved, she would not get an 'A' in Confederation Citizenship and would not be able to take Advanced Magical Theory II next semester, no matter what she scored on her SPAWN. "How is catching a Dark Wizard less important than retouching portraits in the Governor's mansion or raising money for ASPEW or being a Congressman's intern?"

Ms. Grimm sat there thinking for a long time, while Alexandra held herself still. Finally, the Dean said, "You may be sincere, but you will not be pursuing any Dark Wizards. I assure you, you're quite wrong in thinking that no one else is doing anything about Mr. Manuelito. Or have you failed to notice that there have been no further attempts on your life?"

Alexandra didn't reply, unwilling to concede anything.

"My sister has put protective charms around your neighborhood in Larkin Mills," Ms. Grimm continued, "and Aurors will check the area while you are home over winter vacation."

Alexandra objected. "More monitoring of me?"

"Your stubbornness necessitates it. I have no doubt that left unsupervised, you would go looking for trouble. So remember that when you go home - you're being watched. For your own good."

Alexandra clenched her fists.

"I will ask Mrs. Middle to allow you to propose another service project for your class," Ms. Grimm said. "That is all, Miss Quick. Congratulations on your promotion."

Angrily, Alexandra saluted her and left.

That night, Alexandra, Sonja, and Anna sat in the rec room, playing a magical rings game belonging to Sonja. Sonja had only a slight bump on her head, and was much less upset at Alexandra than Alexandra was at her. Alexandra pointed out that she'd looked like a bully. Sonja replied that she hadn't asked Alexandra to send her flying off the platform. So their game was rather tense, with Alexandra tapping her wand on the rings hard enough to make them jump into the air before they disappeared, until she casually mentioned her conversation with David.

"You are so dense, Alexandra," Sonja said, conjuring a blue ring out of the air and adding it to her pile.

"Really?" Alexandra rolled a silver ring across the table, which magically yanked all of Sonja's blue rings into the middle and made them disappear. It was a petty, unstrategic move, since Anna would now be able to claim all of their red rings, but after the events of that afternoon, she was annoyed at being called 'dense.'

Sonja gave her a smug, knowing look. "Why would a boy want to spend time with you in private? Think about it."

Alexandra shook her head. "No. Not David."

"Why not?"

"We're just friends. And he knows better. If you like someone, you shouldn't play stupid games to get their attention, you should just say so."

Anna tapped her wand on the table and drew all their red rings to her, winning the game.

"And trying to duel someone just to spend time with them? That's pretty stupid," Alexandra said.

Sonja rested her chin on her hand and smiled. Anna said nothing.

Witch's Sight

Alexandra was up late the last night of the semester, writing a new Citizenship Project proposal for Mrs. Middle. As a result, she was tired and cranky when she took her SPAWNs the next day. It was all she could do not to snap at the teachers administering them, and when Mr. Grue gave her two more alchemical combinations to perform than he had other ninth graders, she almost threw the wolfsbane leaves into the brazier and stormed out of the room. She didn't need a Superior score in Alchemy, after all. But she gritted her teeth and mixed them with the synthesizing agent Mrs. Verde had taught her about, producing a small amount of greenish paste that she knew she'd brewed correctly even though Mr. Grue took one sniff and dumped it down the sink.

By the time she finished answering all the questions on her Magical Theory test, she couldn't remember most of them. She wouldn't know how she had done until she received an owl later that month in Larkin Mills. But it wouldn't matter unless her report card was perfect.

She found Mrs. Middle in her classroom after the SPAWN tests. The teacher was sitting at her desk, writing in a record book with a very large quill pen. The dreadlocked sixth grader Alexandra had seen the day before outside the Dean's office was scrubbing desks with a plain old brush and a bucket of water. A wand, which Alexandra assumed was the girl's, lay on Mrs. Middle's desk. The girl grinned with nervous embarrassment when Alexandra entered the room.

"Dean Grimm let you off easy," Alexandra said, thinking that scrubbing desks wasn't much of a punishment.

The girl pouted. "I'm going to be doing this all winter break, since I'm not going home."

"Oh," Alexandra said. "Sorry."

"Can I help you, Miss Quick?" asked Mrs. Middle.

"Yes, ma'am." Alexandra walked over to her desk. "I have another Citizenship Project." She handed the teacher a fresh piece of parchment. It wasn't as fine or nicely printed as the last one. "What I wrote last time wasn't a joke, you know."

Mrs. Middle took the parchment with a dubious smile, unrolled it, and read it over.

"Community outreach for... HAGGIS." The teacher blinked several times, rapidly. "Really, Miss Quick, it's inappropriate for children to deal with hags -"

"You're not hagphobic are you, Mrs. Middle? You told us the Confederation respects the rights of all Beings. Except elves."

"I - well, yes -" Mrs. Middle blinked again. "Now wait, I did not say 'except elves.'"

"Oh. I just thought that was understood."

Mrs. Middle's mouth opened, wordlessly.

"Hags have suffered persecution for centuries because of old witches' tales about them," Alexandra said. "Even today it's considered perfectly acceptable to teach children to fear and hate them."

"Miss Quick, have you ever *met* a hag?"

"Yes, ma'am. And none of them tried to eat me. I've already written a letter to HAGGIS asking how I can help."

The teacher fumbled with the parchment. "Why can't you do something with Muggles?"

"Oh, I see. I'm a half-blood so of course I should do something with Muggles."

"I didn't mean that, Miss Quick!"

"What did you mean, ma'am?"

Mrs. Middle stammered and ran out of words.

"So how about HAGGIS?" Alexandra nodded at the parchment.

The teacher's mouth opened and closed. "Well... it's very unusual. No one has ever suggested a service project on behalf of *hags* before!"

"So it's pretty original and ambitious, huh?"

Mrs. Middle seemed unsure how to respond. "I assume you won't be meeting any hags unsupervised?"

"There aren't any hags in Larkin Mills. I'll have to talk to them the next time I go to the Goblin Market. Thank you, ma'am. Um, I don't suppose you've graded our final exams yet?"

"No, Miss Quick, I haven't."

"All right. Merry Christmas, Mrs. Middle." Alexandra reached into a pocket and withdrew a bright red apple, which she placed on the teacher's desk next to the other small gifts students had left her. She had gone to the kitchens to ask Mr. Remy for the biggest, shiniest apple he had, and she was pretty sure elven magic had been used to polish it to unseasonal perfection. "I'll tell the hags that you support them."

Mrs. Middle did not pick up her quill again as Alexandra left. The girl with the scrub brush watched her with a wondering expression.

Alexandra was disappointed that Constance and Forbearance could not persuade Benjamin and Mordecai to let them sit with their friends on the ride home. The last few weeks had been difficult and bleak without the Pritchards sitting with her and Anna and Sonja at meals or playing games in the rec room. Alexandra still couldn't quite accept the idea of her friends being 'bespoken' to the Rashes, or understand why they had acquiesced to it. But she was heeding Anna's advice not to make it worse for them by pressing the issue; after all, she'd told David the same thing.

Alexandra, Anna, David, Dylan, and Sonja sat together on the Charmbridge bus. Sonja invited Carol to join them, but her quiet roommate demurred and took a seat across the aisle instead. "Wocky gets nervous around birds," she said, though she looked more nervous than her rat.

Dylan spent most of the bus ride clumsily and crudely flirting with Sonja. Alexandra couldn't tell whether Sonja was flattered or embarrassed before she got off the bus in Chicago with Anna. Anna promised to call as soon as her father let her leave their wizarding

enclave in San Francisco. To Alexandra's surprise, after Anna hugged her, Sonja did too.

"Do I get a hug?" Dylan asked.

Sonja waved at him and departed, with a toss of her head.

That left Alexandra alone with the two boys. She played chess with David until he got off in Detroit, and then she was alone with Dylan. He proceeded to make several "joking" suggestions about kissing and making out, commented that Anna "wasn't that hot for an Asian chick," and made unflattering comparisons between Alexandra and Sonja, accompanied by curves traced in the air with his fingers. By the time they reached Dylan's stop in Cleveland, Alexandra was ready to shove his wand up his nose, and barely muttered a farewell to him.

The Automagicka took the bus south, and Alexandra spent the rest of the time reading until Mrs. Speaks told her they were almost at her stop. She slung her backpack over her shoulder, tucked her broom under one arm, and picked up Charlie's and Nigel's cages. Thus encumbered, she found herself facing Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence, who had just descended the stairs from the upper level of the bus.

Constance smiled at her. "You didn't think we'uns wasn't gonna say good-bye proper, did you?"

"I wasn't sure," Alexandra said.

"Girls, we're all waiting on you," said Mrs. Speaks from the front of the bus.

Constance hugged her, though Alexandra couldn't hug her back while holding her familiars' cages.

"Miss you terrible," said Charlie.

"You going to be in trouble with them?" Alexandra asked, rolling her eyes upward.

"Hush now," Constance said.

Forbearance kissed her on the cheek. "You take care, Alex, dear. Expect our'n owls to visit."

Innocence wrapped her arms around Alexandra. "Have a merry Christmas, Alex, an' I'll write you what Connie an' Forbearance won't."

"You will not!" Constance snapped.

"Girls!" Mrs. Speaks yelled.

The Pritchards let Alexandra go and returned upstairs. Alexandra walked off the bus, said good-bye to Mrs. Speaks, and reentered the Muggle world.

Claudia and Archie were both there to welcome her home, Claudia with an arm around her shoulders and a peck on the cheek, Archie with a grunt and a nod. Charlie chose that moment to say "Big fat jerk!"

"Take the menagerie upstairs," Archie said.

"I'm going to," Alexandra said, with infinite exasperation. It was as if she'd never been gone.

During the week before Christmas, she caught up on her TV watching, read more about magical theory, and went to the Larkin Mills Public Library to check out everything they had on astronomy and astrology. There was nothing in any of the Muggle books about a Parliament of Stars. She found a few references to some of the names Forbearance had used, but nothing that shed light on any magical associations.

She exchanged emails with David, and was disappointed (and annoyed with herself for being disappointed) that Payton had not emailed her. She thought about calling him, but decided it would be better if he called her.

It was a couple of days before he did. They talked on the phone for over an hour that night - Alexandra talking about Charmbridge Academy, Payton talking about his day school, and both of them bemoaning how much it sucked not to be able to do magic at home - but when Payton asked if she missed him and she said, "Sure," he seemed to find this unsatisfactory.

"I wish you could come to the winter ball," he said.

"There's a winter ball at Charmbridge."

"You aren't going, are you?"

"Probably not."

"Well, who would you go with if you were going?"

"I don't know. I went last year with David's roommate."

"You were dating David's roommate?"

"Hell, no!" Alexandra shuddered at the thought of dating Dylan. "He was just there."

"Oh."

"You can go to your winter ball, you know. Ask some girl you like."

"What makes you think I like any girls besides you?"

"Payton," she said, embarrassed, "you can't tell me there aren't *any* other girls you like."

"So are there boys you like at Charmbridge?"

"No, not really."

"Not really?"

"Just as friends! Don't be stupid."

She detected a certain petulance in his tone. Eventually he dropped the topic of balls, but she was rather annoyed.

"I miss you," he said, as they were saying their good-byes.

"Yeah, I miss you too."

After Alexandra pressed the button to end the call, she wondered if this was how conversations with your boyfriend were supposed to go. She was almost tempted to ask Archie if Payton was acting like a normal boy. She discarded that idea after half a second. She

considered talking to her mother, but dismissed that idea as well. Her mother had never been particularly disposed toward 'girl talk'; Claudia Green was straightforward and unsentimental when discussing the facts of life. Usually that suited Alexandra fine, since she was much the same, but just this once, she wished her mother was more chatty. Maybe more like Julia. She could talk to Julia, if only she were here.

She decided to take a walk. She put on a jacket instead of her charmed, weather-proof cloak and wandered around the neighborhood a bit, wondering what sort of charms Diana Grimm had placed for her 'protection.' Nothing she could see. She'd heard that experienced witches could *sense* magic, so she tried doing that, but without success. She hoped that was something she'd learn in her classes.

It had now been over a month since she had asked Quimley to find John Manuelito. She wanted to summon him, but here in Larkin Mills the Trace Office would notice her doing so, especially with the increased monitoring Dean Grimm had warned her about. She considered doing it anyway at Old Larkin Pond; if Diana Grimm showed up, Alexandra could tell her she was helping the Special Inquisitor do *her* job. But notwithstanding how Diana Grimm might react to that, Alexandra didn't know what a Special Inquisitor would say about a free elf appearing in a Muggle neighborhood. Probably nothing good. She resolved to wait until she returned to Charmbridge, and do it first thing if she didn't hear from Quimley by then.

Lost in thought, she was further distracted by a group of crows sitting on a telephone wire. She was staring at the birds when someone said, "Hello, Alexandra."

She almost bumped into Brian. She looked at him in surprise, standing in the middle of the sidewalk with his hands thrust into the pockets of his brown winter coat. He had a scarf wrapped around the bottom half of his face. Their breaths formed white plumes in air that was too cold for snow. Alexandra only realized when she stopped walking that her old jacket from last year was too thin. Without the magic cloak she wore at school, she was shivering.

"Hi," she said neutrally.

"Guess you're back from school," he said.

"Guess so." Her tone of voice said *Duh!*

He stood there awkwardly, and after a moment, Alexandra started to walk around him.

"We're going caroling again on Christmas Eve," he said. "Wanna come?"

She stopped. With his scarf covering his mouth, she couldn't read his expression.

"Why?" she asked. "Did your mother tell you you have to invite me?"

He shook his head. "I wanted to invite you." His eyes peered at her, squinting against the cold wind.

When she didn't say anything, he spoke again in a muffled voice. "I'd like to be friends again."

A car drove by. Alexandra felt as if the entire street were watching the two of them standing out there in the cold.

After the car was gone, she said, "You have no idea what's happened to me the past three years. *No idea!* Do you know - do you know how many times I wished I could talk to someone here in Larkin Mills? But I couldn't say anything to you, because even if you wanted to hear it, *I'm a witch!*"

Brian winced a little when she raised her voice. Alexandra heard cawing. When she looked over her shoulder, the crows were gone.

"I'm sorry," Brian said. He was still standing as if frozen in place, hands stuck in his pockets, face obscured by his scarf.

"Sorry for what - sorry that you ignored me for three years, or sorry that I'm a witch?"

His shoulders slumped. "I'm just sorry. What else do you want me to say, Alex?"

"I don't know." She stepped back, walking backward away from him.

"Will you come caroling with us?" he asked.

"I'll think about it." She turned around and hurried back to her house.

She wrote a letter to Julia, telling her sister about her conversation with Payton and her conversation with Brian, knowing that it would be after Christmas before Julia received it. Anna called Alexandra that night, excited to tell her that her mother had given her an early birthday present: her very own cell phone. She had to keep it hidden in her room lest her father discover it, and of course it would not work while she was within the walls of Little Wuyi.

Anna had no advice concerning Brian. She didn't quite understand Christmas caroling. But when Alexandra pointed out that it could put Brian in danger if she did start hanging out with him again, Anna said, "You really have to stop using that as an excuse, Alex."

"An excuse for what?"

"For keeping your friends away."

"I don't do that."

Anna didn't say anything.

"He's a Muggle," Alexandra said. "He can't understand the wizarding world."

"My mother understands, when I tell her about it."

Alexandra was troubled after she got off the phone with Anna.

She remained troubled, thinking about Payton, Brian, Quimley, and celestial Powers until Christmas Eve, when Brian came to their door. Alexandra's mother let him in, and he stood in the warm front hall of their house, brushing off a light dusting of snow. Alexandra was reading a book in front of the fire, and Archie was in the next room watching a football game.

"We're going caroling now, a bunch of kids, and some parents," Brian said. "You're welcome to come too, Mrs. Green."

"I don't think so, Brian, but thank you," Mrs. Green said.

Brian rocked back and forth a little on his feet.

"Billy Boggleston isn't coming, is he?" Alexandra asked.

Brian laughed. "What? No way!"

Alexandra studied the fire for a moment.

"Okay," she said. "Let me get my coat."

She went upstairs, taking her book with her. Charlie squawked and fussed as she got ready to go, and she scolded the bird. "You wouldn't go outside if I let you. It's cold and it's snowing."

Wrapped in a coat and a scarf, wearing gloves and a wool cap, she looked like a normal teenager. But she put her wand in her pocket, as she always did before leaving the house.

She and Brian left the house together. Down the street, teenagers, younger kids, and three or four adults were gathered in a yard full of illuminated Santas, snowmen, reindeer, and elves.

"I'm glad you came," Brian said.

"Uh huh," she said.

"Bonnie will be glad, too."

"Hmm."

He cleared his throat. "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

They walked on in silence. They had almost reached the gathering when Alexandra said, "You've barely talked to me in three years, except to call me a freak."

"I said I was sorry." He puffed out a breath of misty air. "You did come anyway."

"Alexandra!" Bonnie waved to her. Brian's little sister was the same age as Mary Dearborn. If she were a witch, she might be going to Charmbridge Academy now. She seemed so young, in a puffy turquoise coat with a pink sweater underneath and a white and pink cap on her head. She wore none of the makeup Alexandra had seen last time. Even her earrings were gone.

Bonnie made a face. "Did your parents make you come, too?"

"No," Alexandra said, "Brian invited me."

"Bonnie, don't be a brat," Brian said.

Bonnie rolled her eyes theatrically.

Alexandra saw a couple of her former classmates, but most of the other kids were younger than her and Brian. They proceeded up Sweetmaple Avenue, caroling at each house, including her own. Alexandra felt very silly singing 'Jingle Bells' and 'Silent Night' with Claudia and Archie watching them in amusement. They went around the block and over to the next street. Alexandra didn't remember some of the carols, but she could mumble along, half-humming.

It became apparent that Bonnie wasn't there voluntarily. Brian tried to hold her hand, but she jerked away from him. She whined about how cold it was and did they really have to go down *another* street and how many times were they going to sing that same stupid song until she was getting on everyone's nerves. Alexandra thought about all the spells she was tempted to use to shut the girl up. She cast a look at Brian, who shrugged wearily. Alexandra began to feel some sympathy for him.

At the end of the next street, Bonnie said, "I'm going home."

"Bonnie, you can't walk off by yourself," said Mr. Carlow, the father of another girl Bonnie's age.

"Sweetmaple Avenue is right there!" Bonnie said, pointing.

Brian said, "Bonnie, be quiet and stay with me."

She gave him a disgusted look and stormed away. Mr. Carlow and one of the women walked after her, but Brian said, "It's all right, Mr. Carlow. I'll walk her home."

"Are you sure, Brian?" the man asked.

"Let her go," said one of the older kids, to general murmurs of assent.

Brian ran after Bonnie, and Alexandra followed him. Brian grabbed his sister. "You embarrassed us, Bonnie! Are you out of your mind? You're acting like such a little brat!"

"I'm sick of caroling! I didn't want to go in the first place."

"If Mom and Dad had come along, you wouldn't dare act like that."

"Tell them." Bonnie tossed her head defiantly.

Brian glared at her, then gave her a shove. "Come on." He walked after her, back toward their house. "Sorry, Alex."

"It's all right. I was getting tired of caroling, too." Alexandra wondered at Bonnie's outburst, and her foolishness in doing something that would obviously get her in trouble.

Brian said, "Don't mention to my parents that we left early, okay?"

Alexandra shrugged. She hadn't been planning to, but she said, "I don't see why you should protect Bonnie."

Bonnie looked over her shoulder. "Are you going to tell on me? There's things I could tell about you, you know."

"Bonnie!" Brian grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. "Don't start with that!" Furious, he raised a hand. Bonnie flinched, but stood her ground. Brian clenched his fist and dropped it. "God, I don't know what's wrong with you, you little -"

"Witch?" Bonnie suggested, her eyes sliding in Alexandra's direction.

Brian shoved her. "Knock it off!"

She staggered and almost fell, then glared at him. Without another word, she turned and stomped back toward their house. It was three houses down, and so Brian watched her without moving. When she got to the sidewalk in front of their house, she stopped, and waited.

"She won't dare go in without me," Brian said. "Anyway, she's an idiot, since Mr. and Mrs. Carlow will probably tell our parents."

"What is her problem?"

Brian shrugged. "She's been like that for the past year. Dad says it's puberty. Mom's used a hairbrush on her more in the past year than she ever did with me - that's why I won't tell them about this." He sighed, and didn't see Alexandra's expression.

Something flapped overhead. Alexandra looked up to see a dark shape flapping away. She almost drew her wand.

"Whoa," Brian said, "what was that?"

"A bird." Alexandra tried to follow its path in the night sky, but all the stars were washed out by the town's lights, and the darkness swallowed it. She still heard the sound of flapping wings, just at the edge of her hearing, and she felt a prickling intuition. "I should go, Brian. You'd better take Bonnie inside."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "Right, well -"

"See you later. Merry Christmas." She took off running down the street, passing a surprised Bonnie. The flapping sound led her toward her own house.

She knew it wasn't Charlie. She was wary and alert, more than usual after a semester of paranoia. Her wand was in her hand as she reached her driveway.

Everything looked normal. Why had she freaked out like that? And what was she going to do if her home was threatened by a wizardly intruder?

She walked to her front door and tried to open it. It resisted her. Thinking Archie had locked it - he was always going on about safety and not leaving the door unlocked - she took the key out of her pocket. The key didn't open the door either.

She was disturbed now. Had her parents changed the lock on her in the past hour? That was ridiculous. But she felt goosebumps. Looking right and left, she saw that there was no one else on the street.

She thrust her hand back into her pocket and gripped her wand, then knocked on the door with her other hand. "Mom!" she cried. "Archie!"

The door swung open into pitch darkness.

Alexandra stepped back and pointed her wand.

"Don't be afraid, Alexandra." A light flared in the darkness, illuminating a cloaked figure with a bearded face.

Alexandra stepped cautiously forward, lowering her wand but keeping it pointed in the direction of the intruder. "What is this?" she asked. "Where are Mom and Archie?"

"They're fine, and exactly where they should be," said Abraham Thorn. "This is a complicated bit of magic I could only have woven in your - and Claudia's - home. We are temporarily outside of time and space, as it were. We have more time than we did back on Croatoa, but not an unlimited amount. Will you enter?"

She looked around suspiciously. Through the doorway into what should have been the small front hallway of her house, there was a dark chamber whose dimensions she could not guess.

"You know," she said, "if you can impersonate someone else with Polyjuice Potion, someone else could impersonate you, couldn't they?"

He smiled. "Why, yes. Though I assure you, the number of wizards in the world besides myself who could cast this spell can be counted on the fingers of one hand. But you are right to be wary."

His approving tone, like that of a proud father, irritated her. She raised her wand again. "So prove you're really Abraham Thorn."

He waved a hand, and Alexandra felt an invisible force push her hand down so her wand pointed at the ground. No longer smiling, he said, "The last time we spoke, you accused me of sending you and Maximilian to the Lands Below, knowing that one of you would die. I told you I did not. I am not sure you believed me then. I hope you believe me now."

She let her arm relax. She walked into the darkness, and felt stone beneath her feet. It was chilly, but without the wind that had been blowing outside. Shadows slid around at the edge of the light cast by her father's wand, suggesting that the chamber was large but not infinite.

"I want to believe you," she said, after she had closed the distance between them and stood before him.

He didn't say anything, but his face remained shadowed by more than the darkness. Alexandra felt grief welling up from places she'd thought were buried, and stirrings of guilt as well. Annoyed, blinking rapidly, she looked around at the space they were occupying. "What is this place? You can just open up another dimension or something?"

"Not exactly."

"You said we're outside time and space."

"More precisely, we are in a time and place where nothing and no one will intrude upon us, so it is safe to move us here. When I return us to our proper time and place, it will be as if no time had passed. I am simplifying a great deal."

"Give me the unsimplified explanation."

"My dear, you must change that demanding tone when addressing me, particularly when asking me for something."

She turned her head to look into his face again. The pained expression in his eyes was gone, replaced by the stern countenance she was more accustomed to. Feeling obstinate, she said, "Is this where you remind me how much I try your patience?"

"Why are you so insistent on provoking me, Alexandra?" he asked, less angry than sad.

She looked away. "I don't even mean to," she mumbled. "You're just - you - you make me - angry! And confused. And you just *show up* and then you talk about whatever you want to talk about and never answer my questions, then you're gone, usually being chased by Aurors or Special Inquisitors..." Her voice trailed off.

He put his hands on her shoulders. She didn't look at him, but she didn't pull away. She allowed him to draw her closer and hold her to him.

"I daresay," he said quietly, "that this is a very difficult time in a young witch's life, and the circumstances of *your* life - many of which I am responsible for - have not made it easier."

She sniffed, and asked, "Why did you come?"

He released his grip on her and drew away a little. "It is Christmas Eve. I brought you a gift."

"Do you bring presents to all of your daughters?"

"When I can." He produced a small, thin object wrapped in red paper from within his cloak.

"How about Livia? Is she going to get a visit from Santa?" She felt a tiny bit of satisfaction at his unguarded surprise. "You didn't know I met Livia?"

"No, I did not."

So you don't hear everything that happens to me. "Do you talk to her?"

Abraham Thorn held the little package in both hands. "Livia is one of my most unforgiving daughters. She knows that she has but to call me and I will come, but I will not if she doesn't wish it."

"How about your eldest daughter?"

There was a long silence before he replied, "What about her?"

"What's her name?"

He shook his head. "No, Alexandra. I made promises. Please do not press me on this."

"Do you see her, too?"

"It has been longer than I would like."

She sighed. "How about Valeria?"

"I haven't been able to visit her since she returned to Europe. We have exchanged letters, though."

"Does she still hate me?"

"Valeria does not hate you, Alexandra. But if you feel aggrieved that she's not ready to forgive you yet, then perhaps you can put yourself in my shoes."

Alexandra didn't have a ready answer to that. What her father had done was different, and worse, to her mind, but she could hardly claim that she deserved Valeria's forgiveness.

He handed her her gift. "You may open it."

She did. It was a little leather book with a seal stamped on the cover. She held up her wand and saw that it was the logo of the Colonial Bank of the New World, embossed in gold.

"You're giving me a bank book?"

"I'm giving you an account. Think of it as an advance on your inheritance."

"That's kind of morbid."

"It is not such a great sum now. You can spend it all on chocolate frogs and ice cream if you choose. But I will add to it. You will never want for anything."

Alexandra opened the book and found the amount written in the first and only entry. "That would be a lot of chocolate frogs and ice cream."

"Obviously, I hope you will be wiser than that."

She closed the little book and put it in her pocket. "Thank you. But you know, money and expensive presents aren't really what I want."

"What do you want, my dear?"

"Answers."

He sighed. "The only questions I have refused to answer are those involving other people."

"Pretty much all my questions involve other people."

His answer was a wry smile.

"Do you know anything about the Parliament of Stars?" she asked.

His smile faded. "Where did you hear about the Parliament of Stars?"

"You tell me first."

"I am not accustomed to my children back-talking me."

"No, Max just obeyed you, didn't he?"

For a moment, she thought her father might slap her. He dropped his hand to his side. She looked down at the ground. He wasn't going to answer her, and she couldn't bring herself to apologize.

"Did you speak to the Stars Above?" It was his tone that surprised her as much as the question; he sounded almost fearful of the answer. She jerked her head up and found him studying her with more worry than anger on his face.

"We tried," she said. "Our ritual didn't work."

"They are teaching you to treat with Powers at Charmbridge?"

"No, it was just my friends. Don't look at me like that - we weren't goofing around. Forbearance thought it was important because of what she read in my astrological chart, and I didn't really believe it would work, but -"

"Ozarkers," he said. "I might have known."

"What's wrong with Ozarkers?"

"Many of them are fine people. Alexandra, you should not be meddling with magic that's outside your experience. And I know you've become obsessed with a certain John Manuelito as well. Forget about him and let others hunt him down."

Thoughts whirled in her head. The contradictions, the knowledge he'd revealed of her friends and her activities, the unanswered questions - how did he know about her interest in John Manuelito? Had he actually talked to Dean Grimm? Or did he know about Quimley?

No, Quimley wanted her to tell her father everything. He would have told Abraham Thorn, if her father had spoken to the elf.

"You were meddling with magic outside your experience at my age, weren't you?" she said. "And if you knew someone was trying to kill you, would you have just waited for the adults to handle it? I don't think so." Her father opened his mouth, but she kept talking before he cut her off. "I'll bet you were teaching Max things by the time he was fourteen, weren't you? Well, that's what I want - I want you to teach me magic. I want you to teach me the stuff I can't learn at school. I want to become better than anyone else my age - I want to

become better than anyone else, period. Except maybe you," she finished, sounding a little less sure of herself than she had when she'd started talking.

"You ask a great deal," he said. "From whence comes this burning ambition?"

"From you."

He considered that a moment, then smiled and shook his head. "That is very flattering, my dear, and I have no doubt there is much of me in you. I've said before that you are more like me than any of my other daughters. But you aren't trying to follow in my footsteps, nor would I wish you to. Something else drives you."

She was silent. He waited. The silence stretched between them. Under his gaze, she broke first.

"I need to know more if I'm going to live longer," she said.

It was hard to tell in the wand-light that bleached their faces white, but he seemed to turn a little gray. "Explain."

"I'm not ready to tell you yet." She thought about him trying to sacrifice someone else in her place, or going to the Lands Below to confront the Generous Ones. *Would he do that?* she wondered.

"Is this because you fear John Manuelito? Rest assured, I will not allow him to harm you."

"It's not just him." She wanted to tell him. Quimley was probably right that if anyone could help her, it was Abraham Thorn. But there was too much doubt in her mind. "My friends who are taking Astrology, they did my star chart, and they said the stars have predicted my death. They think maybe I should consult the Stars Above for advice."

"Astrology! Heavenly Powers! Stay away from that foolishness, Alexandra." He laid his hands on her shoulders. "I swore when you were born that I would protect you from all that threatens you, and I mean to. But you want to learn more magic. You want to become great. Very well. Have patience, and take what opportunities come to you. In the meantime, hold out your wand."

She did so, wondering if he was going to teach her a spell, or perhaps practice wizard-dueling with her. That was a rather frightening prospect, but she prepared herself.

He took her wand from her and tucked it under his robes.

"Hey!" she protested.

Gently, he placed his hands on her shoulders again and turned her around so her back was to him. "One of the problems with learning wandcraft at a young age is that we don't develop some of our finer senses. Magic exists independently of wizards, and wizards did magic before we invented wands. We could feel it. We could breathe it. A wand is a powerful tool, the greatest ever devised for channeling that which is all around us, and there are things even a young witch can do with a wand that no one can do without one. But there are also things you can do without a wand."

"I... used to do magic when I was little," Alexandra said. "Sometimes by wishing things... sometimes with rhymes..."

"Yes, and that's useful, though unreliable. But I'm not asking you to practice doggerel verse or attempt wandless magic. Even if you succeeded, you'd only bring yourself to the attention of the Trace Office, and we don't want that, do we? I want you to see with a witch's sight. I want you to feel what you've started taking for granted, spending all your time at Charmbridge where magic is like air."

"You want me to start... seeing magic?"

"So to speak. Close your eyes and see this room."

That hardly made sense to her, but she tried. She closed her eyes, and tried imagining the room's outlines, where she imagined the walls and floor and ceiling to be. She wondered how she was supposed to 'see' magic. She visualized invisible lines running around them, like a sort of magnetic field. Then she imagined shifting blobs of color or extrasensory perceptions or anything else that might come to mind.

All she saw was the inside of her eyelids, dark with occasional blotchy red flashes.

"It's not working," she said.

"After a few minutes, I'm not surprised." Slowly - reluctantly, it seemed - he took his hands off her shoulders. "And unfortunately, we haven't much time left. I must go."

She felt his beard brush against the side of her face before he kissed her cheek. "The next time we meet," he said, "we will talk some more, and I will teach you some more."

"Okay." She opened her eyes. He was already walking toward the entrance through which she had stepped 'outside time and space.' She could see the street lights of Sweetmaple Avenue through the doorway, and he gestured for her to precede him.

She paused at the threshold and held out her hand. "Um, my wand?"

When the cloaked figure didn't move, she added, "Please?"

"This will be your first exercise in seeing with a witch's sight," he said. "Find it."

Her mouth dropped open. "What - you're going to *hide* my wand? You've got to be kidding!" She realized he was not. "Come on, that's not fair! That's -"

"A challenge? Something more difficult than you're accustomed to, something most children are never asked to do?"

She simmered indignantly. "What if I *need* my wand? I could be attacked again!"

"I will be watching, Alexandra. I am always watching."

"Seriously? You're watching me twenty-four-seven? When do you have time to plot against the Confederation?"

"You will be safe, Alexandra." He sounded a little testy this time.

She closed her mouth, fuming.

"You shouldn't be casting spells at home anyway, so it shouldn't matter," he said. "As long as you find it before you return to Charmbridge."

"Will you give me a hint? Like, will it be somewhere in the house, or do I have to search the whole neighborh -"

"Good-bye, my dear. I will see you again after the new year." His hand pushed her gently through the doorway and outside. She found herself standing on her front porch. She turned around - Abraham Thorn, and the dark interior, were gone, and there was only her front door.

When she turned back to the street, there was a woman standing there, a young, beautiful woman with severe features and dark hair. She wore blood-red robes beneath a black cloak. Alexandra gaped at the witch, who stared back at her with a cool smile, and then nodded slightly. Then she was gone. Alexandra winced - the witch had Apparated in plain sight! But the street was quiet and empty and no one seemed to have noticed.

It only occurred to her some time later, after she had gone inside, that the Trace Office might blame her for the magic her father and his mysterious companion had used in her presence. But if the Trace Office had detected it, then surely Diana Grimm would have been close on their heels?

No owl came from the Trace Office that night, and no Aurors came to Sweetmaple Avenue.

Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections

Alexandra was not feeling very merry on Christmas morning. Her parents had both taken Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off this year, so she couldn't search the house until they went back to work.

She tried closing her eyes and 'feeling' her wand calling to her, but without success. She was surprised at how defenseless she felt without it, even in her own home. For the past four years she had carried it with her everywhere. It wasn't unheard of for a sixth grader to lose a wand and have to beg an older student or teacher to Summon it. This had never happened to Alexandra. She was always conscious of where her wand was; its absence now made her twitchy.

She put on a cheerful face as she sat in front of the tree and opened her presents. Her mother and stepfather were now used to presents being sent by her friends, but Alexandra had been surprised by the Pritchards' package, which came through the Muggle postal service rather than by owl. When Alexandra examined one of the eagle postage stamps very closely, its tiny eye winked at her.

The flat package contained a framed black and white photograph. The entire Pritchard family was posed stolidly in front of a large timber house with a backdrop of tall, majestic trees. The girls were all wearing fine dresses, and Constance and Forbearance wore matching decorative bonnets that were enormous compared to the ones they wore at school. Alexandra saw for the first time the twins' three older brothers and two older sisters, the oldest brother's wife and the sisters' husbands, and Ma and Pa Pritchard. Innocence held the hand of a younger girl, who was in turn holding the hand of a little boy of perhaps five or six. There were several toddlers clinging to various family members, and one of the oldest Pritchard girls was holding a baby.

While the Pritchard patriarch's stern expression remained engraved in stone and everyone else held still as statues, Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence waved at her. Alexandra grinned, and quickly put the picture aside.

David had sent her a book: *1001 Chess Challenges*, by Master Yusuf Shahryār, with an accompanying card: "*If anyone can help you, maybe he can.*"

"Cute, dork," she said, to which the knight on the cover brandished his lance and said: "Turn the cover and say that as thou facest me on the board, oh unschooled one!"

She quickly shoved it under the box holding the Pritchards' photograph.

"One of those audio books," she said to Archie and her mother.

She was warier when she opened Anna's present. It was a long, beautiful feather that seemed to glow with its own light.

A fancy quill? she thought, but it wasn't sharpened for writing. She read the accompanying note:

"Dear Alex: This is a genuine phoenix feather. They're very rare, and completely illegal to import, export, or sell. But not to give as a gift. Love, Anna."

"That's a pretty feather," Claudia said.

"Is it real?" Archie asked.

"It's a phoenix feather." Alexandra found a certificate that Anna had enclosed with the feather, stamped with seals and covered in calligraphy.

"A phoenix feather?" Archie laughed. "That's a good one. From that girlfriend of yours in California, right? They sell those in Chinatown? Probably from a macaw or an ostrich."

Alexandra very carefully laid the feather back in its box, ignoring Archie. She cast a sidelong glance at her mother. Claudia was calmly sipping her coffee, and not saying anything.

Alexandra's gift from the Kings had undoubtedly been chosen by Julia. It was a large, gold-rimmed mirror. Julia had had some foresight, warning in her card:

"Dear Alexandra,

You should probably take care when opening this. It is charmed, of course... though I hope you've become more open with your mother and stepfather, dear stubborn sister!

I was going to send you some potions and notions and a magical hairbrush or two, but I know you would probably just put them in the bottom of your drawer."

(Below this was a doodled pair of red lips which pouted for a second before laughing silently in the same way that Julia did.)

"So, at least this mirror will show you what you could look like if you bothered to take my advice. There's nothing wrong with wanting to look pretty now and then!"

Love,

Julia

(P.S. Perhaps you will be permitted to visit over spring break. I am plying Mother, but she is being so very awful! If she won't agree, I may just Apparate myself to Central Territory. Apparition is harder than it looks! I'll tell you about the Splinching Incident in my next letter.)"

Alexandra risked a glance at the mirror, and her reflection, with a much smoother and rosier complexion, winked back at her. She put it face down before her parents could see it.

Payton had sent her a small glass globe from the Roanoke Magibotanical Gardens gift shop. It showed various flowers fading in and out of view, many of them not found in any Muggle garden.

After all the other presents had been opened - new clothes, gift cards, and a game for her laptop, as well as the things she had gotten for her parents and they for each other - they ate breakfast, and Alexandra again turned her mind to her missing wand.

There was not much she could do to find her wand on Christmas Day with her parents home, but the next day when they both went to work, she turned the house over from top to bottom.

She was relieved to find her parents no longer locked their bedroom door as they had when she was younger. She was pretty sure she could still improvise an Unlocking Charm as she had before acquiring a wand, but she didn't dare with the Trace on her.

She'd had little respect for her parents' privacy as a child. Now, she felt a little guiltier for violating it, but she doubted Abraham Thorn would have the same compunctions. She opened drawers, looked under the bed and dressers, searched the bathroom, and finally opened the closet. Here she paused. Three years ago, just before her first meeting with Ms. Grimm, this was where she had found a bracelet and her mother's high school yearbook.

So much had changed since then, but there was still a sleeping bag and a quilt piled on top of a box in the back corner of the closet. She pulled aside the bedding and found the old beaded bag on top of the box where the yearbook and the bracelet had been hidden.

Alexandra picked up the beaded bag, about to push it aside, and stopped. It was in this bag she'd found a locket with her father's picture. And she'd never looked in it again.

She turned the bag upside down and felt something sliding around. She pried open the mouth of the bag and stuck her fingers inside, and felt the corner of a stiff piece of paper. She pulled it out, and found herself holding a thick color photograph of the sort taken by old Polaroid cameras, yellowed with age.

It was a picture of a girl a few years younger than her. Alexandra laughed when she realized it was her mother, dressed like an 80s pop starlet. Claudia Quick had applied mascara to give herself long, black eyelashes that contrasted with her permed, blonde helmet of hair. She was posing in front of a hedge on a concrete driveway, wearing a denim jacket, sequined jeans, and high-heeled boots.

Alexandra flipped the photograph over. Nothing was written on the other side.

There was something odd about how that photograph had just fallen to the mouth of the bag. Alexandra pushed her hand into the bag again, and spread her fingers. She breathed in astonishment when the sides of the bag did not bulge.

It was bigger on the inside than on the outside, like her magical backpack and Valeria's traveling case. Her mother had had a magical purse in her closet all these years: how had Alexandra not realized what it was the first time she found it?

What else did it contain?

She pushed her arm further into the bag, up to her elbow, groping around and finding nothing. She pushed her arm in as far as it would go, until the beaded bag resembled some sort of monster swallowing her arm up to the shoulder. Her fingertips brushed against an inner surface, but she didn't find anything to grab onto.

She pulled her arm out and turned the bag upside down and shook it. There was no sound, nothing clattered or rustled or jingled, but there was a sudden heaviness and something metallic bulged from the mouth of the bag. Alexandra pulled it out, and along with a small metal canister came a white business card.

She picked up the card first. It was old and faded, but not as faded as the photograph. Her mouth dropped open when she saw the name:

Dr. L.J. Pruett

Family Physician

Below this was a business address and telephone number in Milwaukee. Alexandra didn't know if it was the address of the clinic Diana Grimm had taken her to. She turned the card over, and found a hand-written telephone number with the same Milwaukee area code. She stared at this number for a long time.

Finally, she examined the canister. It was a plain metal tin with blue and silver Arabesque patterns painted on the outside. There was no label. She cautiously opened the lid and looked inside. It was full of green powder.

She sat there on the floor of her parents' closet for quite a while, thinking. Then she slid the card and the photograph into her pocket, put the canister back into the beaded bag, and set everything else back the way it was. Back upstairs in her room, she took out the laptop her parents had given her for Christmas last year and went online. She entered the address of Dr. Pruett's clinic in a map search. She couldn't really tell, since she'd been lying half-prone in Diana Grimm's car when they drove through the city, but it looked like the right part of Milwaukee, a few blocks from the highway, not far from Lake Michigan.

She gave Charlie some owl treats and then lay on her back in her bed, thinking about her discoveries and what they might mean. She

was tempted to call Dr. Pruett. She also wanted to confront her mother. She was sure either approach would be met with the evasiveness she'd come to expect from adults.

Notwithstanding her puzzlement, none of this was going to help her find her wand.

She realized that it had been foolish to think she was going to find her wand hidden in a closet or under a bed. Her father wasn't playing a game of hide and seek. A physical search would probably never turn it up. She was supposed to use her witch's senses.

"How am I supposed to do that if I haven't learned?" she asked out loud, as if her father might answer.

"Fly, fly," said Charlie.

"I can't fly, bird-brain." She thought about her broom in her closet with longing. Then she realized Charlie probably wanted to fly, having been stuck in her room for most of the week. She opened her bedroom window. It was cold but sunny outside, and Charlie hopped to the sill, made a cheerful noise, and flew off over the house opposite the backyard.

Alexandra shut the window and noticed Nigel moving about in his glass case, discomfited by the burst of cold air she'd let into the room. She reached into the enclosure and picked up her other familiar, then lay back down on her bed, letting the snake wrap around her fingers and sample the air with his tongue while she thought about her missing wand.

Could she sense it just by concentrating? 'Witch's sight' probably wasn't literal. She closed her eyes, and tried to picture magic as a visible aura again. She thought about her broom and her backpack in her closet - could she sense anything there? What about that beaded bag downstairs?

After several minutes of concentration, Alexandra hadn't sensed any magic nearby. But she was feeling warm and a little light-headed. She drifted off to sleep.

She woke with a start, with the confused mix of emotions one feels when waking from a dream. She thought she'd dreamed about Maximilian again, but already the daylight was melting away the images in her head.

She looked around, and realized her hands, lying across her stomach, were empty. Where was Nigel? Then she felt a slight weight on her chest, and a scaly lump coiled up almost directly over her heart. She unbuttoned the top button of her shirt and pulled Nigel out from beneath it. The snake squirmed and flicked its tongue rapidly out and in.

"How about you curl up on your warming rock instead?" She put Nigel back in his cage. That nap had not been helpful.

Charlie was still flying around, looking down at the roofs of houses, spotting bits of color and sparkly things while keeping an eye out for larger birds.

Alexandra rubbed her eyes. Maybe her wand was on a rooftop somewhere. Maybe it was on her roof. She considered climbing up there to check.

Maybe later, she thought. She'd feel awfully silly if it was there and she just didn't bother to look, but she was also pretty sure it wouldn't be that simple to find.

Loud cawing came from the backyard. She went to her window and saw Charlie sitting on the fence. She opened the window and shouted, "Well, come in then!"

"Troublesome!" the raven said.

"Shh!" She glared at the bird, and saw something in the patchy, melted snow covering their small backyard. It was a gray, round stone.

"Wicked!" Charlie said, and wings flapping, landed on the stone and pecked at it. It immediately began shaking, throwing Charlie off, and then moved through the snow.

Alexandra flew down the stairs and came running out the back door. Charlie was back on the fence cawing at her. She walked across the yard to the rock, which was immobile again.

That's not a rock. With a lunge, she grabbed it by its tiny arm, and pulled the gnome out of the ground. The ugly little creature made a face at her and wiggled its stunted arms and legs.

She stared at it with wonder. She had seen these creatures often as a child, in her backyard, sometimes in the park, often around Old Larkin Pond. They had never seemed terribly remarkable to her, though she knew that adults never noticed them, and Brian hadn't really believed her either - he always seemed to be looking the other way when she spotted one.

Alexandra had seen plenty of gnomes at Charmbridge, too. Mrs. Verde's Herbology class had rid the lawns and herb gardens of them that fall. In the wizarding world, they were unremarkable pests.

Muggles never noticed them. And since entering the wizarding world, Alexandra had stopped noticing them in Larkin Mills. She had stopped noticing all the creatures she used to see around Larkin Mills. She had even half-convinced herself that the magical creatures she remembered seeing as a child were products of her imagination.

"I didn't imagine you," she said.

The gnome grunted and squirmed.

She grasped it under its doll-like arms and spun about in a circle, faster and faster until she was dizzy herself, and then rather than hurling the creature away, she stumbled to the fence Charlie was perched on and dropped it on the other side.

According to Mrs. Verde (who was not very enthusiastic when she repeated the Department of Magical Wildlife's gnome control regulations), gnomes found in Muggle neighborhoods were supposed to be killed. They'd devastate gardens since Muggles couldn't figure out what was doing it and all their traps and poisons would be useless. But Alexandra didn't much like her neighbors, and anyway, without a wand she had no way of killing a gnome that wouldn't be messy. Even if she'd had her wand, she wouldn't have done it.

Where there was one gnome, there were others. She looked around the yard, while Charlie preened on the fence, but she saw no more suspicious head-like rocks.

What else had she not been paying attention to in her own backyard, once she'd become a witch with a wand? She left Charlie on the fence and went back inside to put on her coat before emerging again, this time out the front door.

With the sun out, the snow was melting into a slurry on the streets and sidewalks, so she had to watch her step. She walked around her block, now and then pausing to look at lawns, fences, and chimneys. Charlie followed her, circling overhead and cawing. She didn't see anything special.

The next day, she checked her email and found messages from David, Payton, and Anna. Anna was now permitted to visit the public library whenever she wished, though her father still didn't know she was going there to use their computers. David still wasn't sure if he wanted to give up Quidditch for dueling. Payton promised to call her the next day.

Alexandra answered them all quickly, then went walking again. Charlie was not inclined to venture out this time - it was much colder and more overcast than the previous day - so she left her familiar in her room.

At the end of Sweetmaple Avenue she crossed the street, heading toward downtown, when she heard Brian calling her name. She paused at the corner and looked over her shoulder. He came jogging up to her, puffing clouds of breath in front of him.

"I saw you walking around yesterday," he said.

"I'm walking around today, too," she said. "Is that the latest rumor going around the neighborhood - Alexandra Quick is so weird, she walks around in public?"

Brian stuck his hands into the pockets of his big downy coat. "I was just... wondering what you're doing."

She squinted at him. Then she nodded in the direction of downtown. "Come on."

She resumed walking. It took him a few moments before he followed. "Um, where are we going?"

"I want to see something."

"What?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

They kept walking. They passed a drugstore and a couple of strip malls, an empty lot which Alexandra paused to look into, and then, before downtown proper, they reached Third Street and the old Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse.

It was a large, abandoned, three-story building. It had been empty for as long as Alexandra could remember. Her parents had never been able to tell her when there was actually a Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections factory, or if they had ever sold their sweets and confections in Larkin Mills. Now, it was a forbidding place with 'Condemned' and 'No trespassing' and 'Danger' posted all over. The lot was surrounded by a fence topped with barbed wire.

She looked up at the third story, and saw a hunched figure at the window. She waved at it. It didn't wave back.

Brian asked, "Who are you waving at?"

"Do you see someone up there?" She pointed at the window, but the figure was gone.

"The only people who'd be in there are vagrants," Brian said. "Even the stoners and Billy Bogleston's crowd don't go in there."

"Why, is it haunted?"

Brian hesitated. "Of course not."

She looked at the building again. When had that fence gone up? When had Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections become surrounded by barbed wire?

"We shouldn't hang out here," Brian said.

She had started seeing things like a Muggle. She looked again. There was no fence or barbed wire. There were no signs. The Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse was an old, empty building, but it was not so terribly dangerous or forbidding... even if there was someone lurking up there on the upper floor. As a child, she'd imagined ghouls haunting the building. Now she knew this was exactly the sort of place actual ghouls might live. Ghouls were

harmless, but she'd never seen one, and she was very curious. She was also very curious to know why Muggle-Repelling Charms had been put around this building.

What would Brian see, she wondered, if she walked inside? And might her father have hidden her wand in there?

"Come on," she said. "Let's go to the mall."

Brian kept his questions in check. At the mall, they visited the arcade and then had lunch in the food court. Their conversation remained sparse, while Alexandra thought about when she could return to the abandoned warehouse, and Brian seemed to be searching for something to talk about. Finally he said, "What is it like?"

That brought her attention back to him. "What is what like?"

"Doing magic."

She sipped her soda. "I don't know how to explain it. You saw me do magic when we were children."

"Not with... actual spells. Do you really use a wand?"

"Yes." She sighed. "Except my father's hidden it from me."

"Archie took your wand away?" Brian was confused. Alexandra never referred to Archie as her father, and she had never told him about Abraham Thorn.

"It's a long story. A lot's happened in three years."

He waited, as if expecting her to continue. Over his shoulder, she saw Billy Boggleston and his friends standing in line for pizza.

"Crap," she said. "Let's get out of here. Billy and his friends are here. Don't look! I don't feel like dealing with them right now."

It bothered her a great deal that one of the reasons she wanted to avoid the boys was that she didn't have her wand. It shouldn't have made a difference, since she couldn't use it on them anyway, but she was beginning to realize how vulnerable she felt without the hickory wand she'd been carrying for the past three and a half years.

She wasn't afraid of Billy, but somehow she didn't feel as invincible and fearless as she once had, before she'd ever touched a wand.

Brian didn't argue, and Billy, Gordie, and Tom didn't see them as they quickly left the food court and the mall. Alexandra and Brian walked all the way back to Sweetmaple Avenue in relative silence, until Alexandra asked, "Do you want to come to my house?"

"Um... are your folks home?"

"No."

He scuffed the toe of his shoe against a chunk of ice on the sidewalk. "My parents wouldn't like it if I was there with you without any adults around."

"What? We're *fourteen*. Do your parents still think we need babysitters?"

Brian hesitated. "It's... kind of a rule. No going to a girl's house or having any girls over without parents around."

"What?" For a moment, Alexandra was confused. Then she felt a rush of embarrassment. "Wait a minute - are you serious? You think -"

"No!" He held up his hands. "It's just my mom, Alex. You know how she is."

She rolled her eyes. "Right."

He sighed. "We're going to visit my grandmother tomorrow morning and won't be back until Thursday."

"Oh." She shrugged, surprised at the twinge of disappointment.

"They're opening up Larkin Mills Pond for ice skating on New Year's Eve. Want to come?"

She considered that, and her face darkened for a moment, remembering a scene at Larkin Mills Pond where Brian had called her a freak, in front of Bonnie and Billy and everyone else they knew here in town. But she nodded. "Sure."

"Cool. Well, see you then."

"Have fun at your grandmother's house."

She went inside and threw herself on her bed, more confused than ever, and not just about her hidden wand.

There was no email from Anna the next morning, but Alexandra received a message at her window. It was a single barn owl, looking chilly and lonesome.

She let it in and closed the window, saying, "I've never seen you without your twin."

The owl hooted sadly.

Alexandra took the parchment tied to the owl's leg, gave it some owl treats, and let it warm itself while she read the note. It was signed 'Constance and Forbearance' but Alexandra recognized Forbearance's handwriting.

"Dear Alexandra,

We hope you had a very Merry Christmas and that you and your family are happy and healthy and enjoying all good things.

We have some very interesting news for you, but we should probably wait until we see each other at Charmbridge before we speak about it."

The rest of the letter was a benign account of their vacation, which seemed to mostly be spent doing chores and taking care of their younger siblings. Alexandra read it twice, thinking there was something odd about the letter, and her eyes fell again on the underlined 'very interesting news.'

Of course! They'd written her a secret message, using an Editing Ink Charm.

She groaned and leaned forward, thumping her head on her desk until Forbearance's owl hopped and hooted worriedly. Alexandra sat up and gave the owl an apologetic smile.

"They're probably expecting me to answer," she said.

The owl hooted again.

She unrolled a bit of the parchment she'd brought home, and penned a quick reply:

"Dear Constance and Forbearance,

Thank you very much for your very interesting news. You'll never guess what happened to me over vacation? I lost my wand! Seriously! It's actually a longer story than that, but I have to go find it now. I'll write back soon with more news of my own - sorry this letter is so short.

Sincerely,

AQ"

The stylized pair of initials was something she'd just begun doing recently because she thought it looked cool. She tied the parchment to the owl's leg and said, "Take care." She opened her window, and the owl hooted and took off.

"You fly too, Charlie," she said.

Charlie said "Fly, fly!" but with a head tilt and less enthusiasm than usual.

"I know it's cold outside, but we have to find my wand. Fly!"

With much fluffing and puffing and fluttering and what Alexandra construed as something like a sigh, Charlie finally took off. She shut the window and put on her winter clothes before going outside.

She couldn't see Charlie, but she knew Charlie could see her. She walked a block before it occurred to her to wonder how she knew that. She looked up, but the brooding gray sky was empty. She scanned nearby rooftops and winter-bare trees, but there were too many places for a raven to hide. Charlie probably wasn't even hiding. She thought about calling Charlie to her in her mind, to see if it would work, but then people would notice the girl walking through town with a raven on her shoulder.

She crossed the park, taking a shortcut she hadn't on the day she'd walked with Brian, and reached the corner opposite the abandoned Regal Royalty warehouse. A black blur caught her eye as Charlie

soared overhead and landed on the roof three stories above and cawed at her. She couldn't see anyone moving through the windows. The building seemed as empty and abandoned as ever.

She tried unfocusing her eyes. She found that when she *expected* to see a Muggle building with 'No Trespassing' signs and a barbed wire fence, she did, and when she didn't want to see those things, they disappeared. Once she knew the trick, it was like magic, standing there on the street corner watching fences and signs and gloom and broken glass and jagged, rusted metal doors appear and disappear in the blink of an eye.

It is magic, she thought. It was magic that had been right before her eyes all this time. Why didn't they teach them to see these things at Charmbridge?

The answer, of course, was obvious. No one at Charmbridge was taught to look for magic hidden in the Muggle world, because no one at Charmbridge was taught to live in the Muggle world. Oh, there were Muggle Studies classes and a yearly Muggle Awareness Month, which taught wizards to *tolerate* Muggles and maybe walk among them now and then, but Alexandra had never heard anyone, even among Muggle-borns, talk about graduating from Charmbridge Academy and then living in the Muggle world like the Wandless did.

Which left the question of why there was a building in the middle of Larkin Mills with magic charms on it.

She tried to look casual as she crossed the street and loitered near the fence. She reached a hand out to touch it, and found that just as she could make it appear and disappear from her sight, so could she touch it, push against it, even lean on it, and then pass a hand through it when she willed it to disappear.

A man in a hoodie under a threadbare winter coat walked past her, flipping a cigarette butt onto the sidewalk and giving her an unfriendly once-over. She resisted the impulse to glare or otherwise call attention to herself. Charlie cawed overhead. Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections was right at the edge of Old Larkin, not somewhere her stepfather would want her hanging out, and he would hear about it if one of his buddies on the police force were to drive by. Alexandra waited until the moderately busy street was clear of traffic for a moment, then walked straight through the fence-that-wasn't-there and made a beeline for the door that was a rusting,

heavy metal padlocked thing to Muggles, and a much less imposing metal door without chains or locks to her witch's sight. She was unsurprised to find that it opened easily. Without looking back to see if anyone was watching, she walked inside and closed the door behind her. On the roof, she knew Charlie was waiting nervously.

The ground floor was all empty space with a few dark and dusty offices along the walls. It was almost as cold inside as it was outside, though contrary to its dilapidated appearance, no windows were broken and no snow had entered to pile up on the floors, though there were plenty of damp spots and water stains. Alexandra walked around in the abandoned warehouse for a few minutes, but saw nothing of interest other than an old, disconnected cast-iron boiler.

Notwithstanding what Brian had told her, Alexandra was surprised to find no signs at all of intruders, vandals, or squatters. Larkin Mills didn't have much of a homeless population, especially in the wintertime, but Alexandra heard Archie talk about the 'bums' and junkies he sometimes arrested. There were also vagabonds who passed through town, usually sent quickly on their way by the Larkin Mills P.D. A large, abandoned building like this would naturally attract occasional travelers or daring teenagers, barbed wire or no, but it seemed undisturbed. There was dust and some decay, but no trash or vandalism.

Alexandra found an old-fashioned elevator enclosed in a wire cage, like those at Grundy's. It was something from a century ago. Just how long ago had Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections gone out of business? She'd never heard anyone mention it, not even Mrs. Wilborough, the nosy old lady who lived across the street from Alexandra's house and was always talking about how much nicer the town used to be.

Next to the elevator were the stairs. Alexandra opened the door and looked up into the shadows of the unlit stairwell.

She wasn't afraid, but she knew she really shouldn't be here. At the same time, she was quite certain that she should be - was it possible that her father didn't know about this place? She didn't think so. And if he expected her to find it, then could he possibly expect her not to search for her wand here? If there were hidden dangers here, he wouldn't have led her here, would he?

She walked up the stairs, annoyed by the increasing thud of her heartbeat and the way her fingers twitched at the absence of her wand.

The second floor was more offices with old wooden filing cabinets, some knocked over and lying on their sides. One had been left open, with papers strewn about. There were some old desks as well, and bookshelves that were mostly empty but here and there holding scrolls or ledgers. Alexandra picked up a handful of slips of paper from a desk and walked closer to a window where enough light shined through to read them. They were faded invoices for things like Candy-Covered Butter and Choco-Crocs and Eternal Chewing Gum. The dates went back decades.

She was about to put the invoices down when she noticed the charges. They were not listed in dollars; they were listed in lions. She looked more closely at the addresses.

They had been sent to *Melusine's* (Goblin Market/New Amsterdam); *Grundy's Department Store* (Goblin Market/Chicago); *Astoria's Cafe* (New Roanoke); and invoices of a different color, with no costs listed, only units, to *Goody Pruett's Witch-Made Pies, Cakes, and Other Confections* in New Amsterdam, Chicago, and Sheboygan.

"Wow," she said. Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections was - had been - a wizard business.

Warier than ever, and also more certain than ever that her father had hidden her wand somewhere in this place, Alexandra took the stairs up to the third floor.

Where the first floor had been mostly open and empty and the second floor packed with offices, the third floor was half of each. To the right of the stairs was a large, open area where whatever had been there once - walls, fixtures, plumbing - had simply been torn out, leaving a large empty space with cold light flooding in from the windows all around. To her left were more offices, but these had thick wooden doors with metal plaques on them, some decorated with gargoyle faces. She supposed this was where the managers' offices had been.

She walked to the nearest door, but it was too dark to read the name on it. She wished again that she had her wand, or had thought to bring a flashlight.

She heard a noise and grabbed for her wand before she could stop herself.

"Hello?" she called out.

It was probably a ghoul. They haunted old buildings, but they were harmless to people. Or so she had read - and of course, when wizards wrote that something was 'harmless,' what they meant was 'harmless to wizards.' Without a wand, she was practically a Muggle.

The shuffling noise came from the dark half of the building, the offices to her left, and since the doors were closed, no light seeped in through any windows to light the corridors. Harmless or not, she didn't want to bump into something in the dark. She backed into the empty open space. Bits of metal and a few cards and stiff paper folders were scattered about the floor. There was a fireplace set into the brick wall, the chimney running up to the top of the building, not far from where Charlie was still perched, but it obviously hadn't been lit in many years.

Alexandra squinted at the shadows which she had just left, and which now stood between her and the stairs. Should the ghoul or other being that was up here prove to be dangerous, she'd now cut herself off from her escape route.

"Hello?" she called out again. "I don't mean you any harm." This didn't come out sounding quite as assertive as she'd intended.

The shadow moved toward her and took lumpy, hunch-shouldered form as it separated itself from the darkness of the corridor and stepped into the same light Alexandra was standing in.

It was not a ghoul, but a very large woman layered in tattered, frayed garments from head to ankle. Her feet were wrapped in fine leather boots. She had bulbous, greenish features and enormous teeth. Her eyes were almost invisible in the craggy shadows of her face, but Alexandra could just make out the red gleam in them.

"That's so sweet of you," the woman said, in the doddering voice of a little old lady. "But whatever harm could a little girl like you do?" She rubbed great, gnarled hands together, displaying black nails like iron. "You do look like such a sweet thing."

Goody Pruett

"You're a hag," Alexandra said.

The bulky, shambling woman's face stretched into a broad smile, showing teeth that were large, yellow, and sharp. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I didn't mean it that way." Alexandra tried to resist the impulse to back away, but she did anyway when the hag stepped forward. "Are you supposed to be here?"

The hag laughed. "Why, dear child, what a question for you to be asking me!"

"Central Territory has pretty strict laws about magical creatures in Muggle towns."

"I'm no more a 'creature' than you are. And just what are you doing here, little girl?"

Alexandra didn't think "Looking for my wand" would be a smart thing to say. "I was curious about the Muggle-Repelling Charms. I don't suppose you put them there?"

"Of course not. Why, I'd need a wand to do that, and it would be completely illegal for my kind - that is to say, 'creatures' like me - to own a wand." The hag's voice was as cheerful as her smile, but Alexandra had the feeling that both were as false as a rubber mask.

"I've been reading literature from HAGGIS," Alexandra said. "I'm, uh, actually a supporter of hags' rights." The first part, at least, was true - though she hadn't yet signed her 'Friend of HAGGIS' membership form and sent it in with the requested donation.

The hag made a dismissive gesture with one of her long-nailed hands. "HAGGIS... those accommodating old grandmothers." She narrowed her gleaming red eyes and took another step toward Alexandra. "Now, I believe we were talking about you, young witch. You are a witch, aren't you?"

"Of course. I have a wand, don't I?" Alexandra patted her jacket pocket where she normally kept her wand.

"Of course you do," the hag all but cooed. "But..." She brought a hard iron nail to her lips, as if considering. "How odd that you were walking around in the dark. My eyes aren't what they used to be, dear. Would you mind creating some light, the better to see you with?"

Alexandra stood there, thinking wildly.

The hag smiled toothily again. "You do know that spell, don't you? I understand it's one of the first things they teach young witches at witching school."

"I'd get in trouble with the Trace Office. Underage witches aren't allowed to use magic in Muggle neighborhoods."

"Ah." The hag shuffled forward ever so casually. "Well, dear, the interesting thing is that the Trace Office won't know you're here. This place isn't just protected against Muggles."

"Really?" Alexandra laid her hand on her pocket again. "You mean they wouldn't even detect an Unforgivable?"

The hag paused. "You don't really expect me to believe you know how to cast an Unforgivable Curse."

Alexandra shrugged, and hoped she wasn't sweating.

The hag grinned again. "Where are my manners? I haven't introduced myself. You can call me Martha."

"My name is Alexandra. Alexandra Quick."

The hag nodded gravely. "It's so nice to meet you, Alexandra."

"Likewise. So are you like, squatting here?"

"Why, I suppose you could say that." Martha began moving steadily toward Alexandra again, who tried to keep her feet rooted in place. "And the fact is, I'd very much hate for anyone to find out I'm here."

"I won't tell."

"I do wish I could believe you, but children... well, the truth is -" Martha's face no longer looked friendly at all. "- children are *nasty, untrustworthy little creatures!*" She lunged, and Alexandra ducked

under those long, thick arms, scrambling frantically away from her. Martha whirled, no longer shambling with slow, uncertain movements, but with the speed of a big, strong predator. She was too close to the exit for Alexandra to slip past her without coming within arm's length again.

"Don't make me curse you," Alexandra said.

"Can you curse me?" Martha advanced, backing Alexandra toward a window, but her eyes were on Alexandra's hand, which still hovered near her jacket pocket. "I know they don't teach witches much at your age. Assuming you are a witch and not -" her smile was cunning and spiteful now " - a Squib."

Alexandra knew she was in trouble. Charlie was flapping about frantically on the roof, aware of her distress, and Alexandra thought, *I wish you could help me, Charlie. I could really use it.*

Martha grabbed her, moving so quickly Alexandra had no chance to duck away this time, and lifted her off the ground.

"Skinny little girl," the hag said, as if she had just caught a fish and was dissatisfied with its size.

Alexandra kicked her in the chest as hard as she could, and tried to kick her in the face, but Martha only laughed and shook her hard enough to whip her head violently back and forth. Alexandra cried out and blindly slapped the hag's forehead with her palm.

Martha dropped her and raised her hands to her forehead. Smoke curled from between her fingers. "You horrible little brat!" she screamed.

"Wicked!" screeched Charlie, and just as Martha lowered her hands from her face, the raven dived at her, pecking at her eyes and slashing at her nose, black wings beating the air. Martha howled and clawed the air, but the raven seemed to terrify her beyond reason as she shrieked hysterically and ran about blindly before tumbling to the floor.

Alexandra didn't know how her familiar had suddenly appeared inside, but she leaped to her feet and spoke one word: "Charlie!" The raven immediately left off harrying the hag and flew to her outstretched arm.

Alexandra breathed in and out rapidly, gauging the distance to the stairs. Martha could still intercept her easily. The hag slowly lifted her head to reveal a glowering face with blisters on her forehead and scratches on her nose. Her red eyes flashed with anger and fear, and Alexandra knew that fear - fear of her - was the only thing that would save her.

"How dare you call me a Squib?" she demanded, trying to imitate her father at his most outraged and arrogant. "I am Alexandra Octavia Quick, eighth child of Abraham Thorn!"

There was something not right about invoking her father's name like this - it sounded false in her ears, and hateful and wrong to say 'Squib' the way she did, but it had the desired effect on Martha, who clearly recognized the name of Abraham Thorn and shrank away from her.

Might as well lay it on thick. "That's right, I'm the seventh daughter of the Enemy of the Confederation! I've been to the Lands Below and fought the Generous Ones! I've been to the Lands Beyond, treated with the Most Deathly Power, and come back alive. My fate is written in the Stars Above. Do you really think I'm afraid of a hag?"

She was almost beginning to believe her own words. Martha looked more and more cowed. Alexandra filled her voice with all the menace she could: "If I draw my wand, I will turn you to stone and push you out a window and let you shatter on the ground outside, and then I'll turn you back to flesh and let the ravens feast on your eyes."

Charlie screeched.

That was awesome, she thought. Better than one of her doggerel verses. She wished her friends could have heard it. It was an absurd self-congratulatory moment. But her exultation did not last long; she knew she was screwed if Martha called her bluff.

The hag's eyes, however, had become round, with a rim of white around their black and red centers. She remained crouching where she was, almost on hands and knees, and Alexandra detected a slight shiver.

"Now, now, you wouldn't do that to poor Martha," the hag said. "I was just trying to make sure I had someplace warm to hide from the

winter wind. You know, so often we hags are forced to live in the wilds, it's rare we have shelter and I only wanted a cozy place to rest my old bones..."

"Tell me about this place and why you're really here. Don't talk to me like I'm some stupid little girl who's going to believe a story about you stumbling in here to take shelter from the cold."

"I didn't know your family still had an interest in this property." Martha's voice lost its false, syrupy sweetness, and became blunt and businesslike. "I thought it was abandoned and that Abra - your father - no longer took an interest in the business affairs of the Dark Convention."

Alexandra hoped her confusion wasn't showing on her face as she tried to maintain her bluff. "My father isn't interested in this property - I am. He doesn't live in Larkin Mills, I do. And if you want to use it, you should have asked me."

The hag squinted. "Begging your pardon, Miss... Quick, but I've got no reason to know the pedigree of every witch I meet. According to the Confederation Census, no Pruetts still live in this miserable Muggle town. Or so I was told."

Alexandra couldn't hide her surprise when Martha mentioned the Pruetts. Martha's squint became a frown. "Er, if I was misinformed, of course I apologize to you and... your father."

"The Pruetts still own Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections." Alexandra made it sound like a statement and not a question.

The hag's immense nose wrinkled, and she made a snuffling sound. "Well, I thought the business was no longer extant." Suddenly kindly again, she added, "That means it doesn't exist anymore -"

"I know what 'extant' means!"

Alexandra almost regretted snapping, but Martha bobbed her head rapidly. "Of course you do. Such a bright child, as I'd expect from a daughter of Thorn."

"So what have you been doing here?" Alexandra walked in a slow circle around the hag, holding her head high and keeping her thumb casually hooked in the pocket that supposedly contained her wand,

all the while making sure she was out of reach. In an imitation of her posture and bearing that would have been comical in any other situation, Charlie sat on her shoulder, head erect and wings bent just so, as if ready to fly, or dive at Martha again.

It seemed to be working, for the moment. Martha, who had only half-risen to her feet, remained where she was and watched Alexandra and her familiar nervously.

"We, er, we've been using this warehouse for years," Martha said. "Your father never revoked his permission."

Alexandra looked out the window, as if casually inspecting the view, while she pondered the meaning of 'we.' She hated taking her eyes off the hag even for a moment, but relied on Charlie to act as her second pair of eyes.

"Has the Dark Convention been paying rent?" she asked.

She had no idea what sort of arrangement her father had with the Dark Convention, but when she turned back to Martha again, still with forced casualness, she seemed to have struck a nerve. Martha's head was lower, she was wringing her hands, and she was definitely more nervous.

"Nothing was ever spoken of," Martha muttered.

"So you just figured you could keep using our family's property for... what exactly?"

The hag's cough was like a rasp scraping up through a cavern. "Oh, storage, temporary refuge, this and that. We hags, we cobble a pigeon anywhere we can find one, buying, selling, lending..."

It sounded to Alexandra as if the Dark Convention was basically a bunch of smugglers and loan sharks. She wondered if all hags were in on this, if Martha were just one link in a chain reaching to the Goblin Market and beyond. Curiosity bubbled inside her. "And what exactly are you storing here? You don't sell things or... lend money to Muggles, do you?"

"Certainly not. This place is useful because neither Muggles nor wizards pay attention to it. But I'm a mere watcher. I wouldn't know what's actually kept here."

Martha sounded quite sincere, but Alexandra doubted her. "I want to see everything. I live here and I want to be sure nothing is endangering... my privacy or wizarding secrecy. I'm very displeased that no one asked for *my* permission to keep using this place."

"I assure you, I - we are very discreet." The rags wrapped around Martha's head were beginning to flutter loose, exposing wispy curls of hair like steel wool. "You know, if someone had only told me -"

"I'm sure *someone* will be talked to," Alexandra said ominously. She was actually beginning to enjoy this play-acting.

The hag gave her a sickly smile. "I assure you, the building has been left as we found it, and no one has trespassed... at least, not for long."

"You haven't been making anyone disappear, have you? Like children?" The sudden thought reminded Alexandra of the stakes, and made this game much less enjoyable.

Martha put a great, green hand to her bosom. "Dear child, I thought you said you support hags' rights! Surely you know better than to believe that sort of vile slander!" And when Alexandra continued to give her a flat, threatening stare, the hag added, "Besides, we don't shit where we eat, if you'll pardon my French, heh heh." Her cackle trailed off quickly. "Figure of speech."

"And you've never been seen by Muggles?"

"Muggles?" Martha spat. "They don't notice anything."

"So who's been bringing things in and out of here?"

"The less I know, the better, dear. When I hear someone Apparate, I keep my distance, yes, I do. Everything I need to know gets left me in writing, or occasionally an owl."

Alexandra folded her arms, thinking. She had no idea what to do with this information. Then she remembered the original purpose of her visit.

"When did you last hear someone Apparating?" she asked.

"Last night."

"Where?"

"On the ground floor, of course. That's where deliveries and collections are left."

"I didn't see anything down there."

"Of course not. I store them on the second floor, in one of the offices or closets. You aren't planning to go there, are you? There are, er, some curses and more mundane things you wouldn't want to encounter stumbling around in the dark."

"How do you manage, with your poor vision?"

Martha's smile widened. "Oh, I was just teasing you earlier, dear. We hags have excellent night vision. See in the dark better than a cat, we do."

It was a perfect place to hide her wand. If her father knew about this abandoned warehouse - and how could he not? - then he must have intended her to get past this hag guardian as a kind of test.

She did not at all like the idea of going downstairs with Martha. She also didn't like the idea of telling her father that she'd been too afraid to look in the most obvious place.

"Bring me a lamp," she said.

Martha narrowed her eyes, and Alexandra thought she was going to argue, or worse - but Charlie puffed up and cried, "Wicked! Wicked!"

Martha cringed and disappeared back into the hallway. Alexandra heard her walking around back there and opening a door. The third floor, she decided, must be the hag's living quarters. A minute later, Martha returned with a lantern and held it out.

Alexandra steeled herself and walked over to take it from her as if she weren't worried at all about the hag grabbing her again. Martha pursed her lips sullenly, but kept her clawed hands at her sides.

"Lead on," Alexandra said, gesturing with the lantern.

Martha muttered something under her breath. Charlie clacked nervously as Alexandra followed her to the stairs.

"It's all good, Charlie," Alexandra said, exuding confidence.

Back on the second floor, the lantern illuminated oak doors and what had once been lush carpets as they walked away from the stairs and deeper into the maze of corridors. Tubes hung from the ceiling, and there were empty spaces in the walls that might once have been dumbwaiters or something of the sort. They passed a very large, bent cage; it looked like Charlie's cage, but several times larger. There were posters with the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections logo and pictures of candies of all shapes and sizes and colors, but hanging on the wall at the end of a wide middle corridor that came to a T-intersection was a life-sized portrait. As Alexandra held the light up to it, a bonneted witch in a black and white dress looked down at her, and raised a wrinkled hand to shield her face.

"I didn't think your kind had young," the painting said in a spiteful tone.

"Shut up you old -" Martha raised a clawed hand to the portrait, as if to tear at it, then checked herself and smiled horribly at Alexandra over her shoulder. "Oh, Goody Pruett and I do so enjoy our banter, heh heh."

Alexandra lowered the lantern and studied the familiar face. She had seen Goody Pruett's profile at the cake and ice cream store chain, but never encountered a magical portrait of the woman herself. She had, in fact, never realized that Goody Pruett was an actual person.

"I'm not a, er, young hag," she said.

Goody Pruett did a double-take. She put a hand to her chest. "Heavenly Stars Above! What are you doing here, young witch? Run, run for your life!"

"Fly, fly!" said Charlie, before Alexandra shushed the bird.

"It's okay," Alexandra said, "I'm not in any danger." She tried to sound convincing.

"She's a hag!" exclaimed Goody Pruett, pointing at Martha.

"I know."

The portrait's mouth gaped open, then she shut it and shook her head. "No," she said. "Merciful heavens, you can't be one of *them* - those warlocks, those sorcerers! You're too young!"

"You mean the Dark Convention?"

"Whatever they call themselves nowadays! Blaggards and blackguards, scurrying in the shadows selling curses and noxious unguents and worse! To think that the business of my family for generations, the very foundations of our blessed enterprise, is now nothing more than a den for the vilest -"

"She'll go on like this for quite a long time, dear," said Martha. "Shall we, er, move along?"

Alexandra wondered what had kept Martha from tearing the portrait down, and why the Pruett matriarch was not hanging in the home of one of her descendants, instead of here in this abandoned warehouse. She shrugged apologetically at the portrait, who was indeed still railing, and followed Martha into a large room lined with old, dusty, wooden shelves full of crates and chests.

"Here's where I keep things until there's a pick-up to be made," Martha said. "I do hope you're not planning to open anything." Her eyes narrowed and her lips formed a tight smile. "There are a lot of people who would be very unhappy if you did that."

Alexandra affected a tone of indifference. "I'm not going to open anything." She walked into the room and shined the light around, trying not to shiver or think too hard about the fact that Martha was now blocking the exit. Charlie left her shoulder and perched on a shelf by the door, looking down at Martha, who edged away slightly.

The boxes and crates told her nothing about their contents. She concentrated, trying to feel magic, but the boxes could have been full of styrofoam packing peanuts for all that she could sense from them.

The absence of any magical sensation made her suddenly aware of what she wasn't feeling, though. The hickory wand that she had carried since she was eleven had always been close at hand if not on her person, and Alexandra was always aware of it. Until now, she had not consciously realized how she had been feeling its absence since her father took it away. She *could* feel magic! She could feel

her wand. While she'd been searching her house and walking around town trying to sense her wand, she'd been sensing its absence all along. And with that realization, she knew with certainty that she would sense its presence. From exactly how far away, she didn't know, but when she casually laid a hand on a small wooden box, she felt a deep conviction that had her wand been in that box, she would have known it.

She walked around the room, brushing against crates, running her fingers along shelves, until Martha said nervously, "You really shouldn't touch things, dear. Curses..."

"You'd tell me if I were about to get cursed," Alexandra said. "Because if the curse didn't kill me, I'd curse you worse, and if it did kill me, my father would hunt you down and turn you inside out. I don't think you're that foolish, Martha." Again, casually, she touched her pocket, as if running her fingers along the length of her wand.

Martha fell silent, her eyes glowing dully.

Time to get out of here, Alexandra thought. She'd been wrong. Her wand wasn't here.

She walked to the door, gesturing to Charlie. The raven landed on her shoulder again. Alexandra walked past, close enough for the hag to reach out and squeeze her neck in one motion. She prayed hags didn't have hearing to match their vision or Martha would hear her heart pounding in her chest. She forced herself to appear cool and unconcerned, but once she was walking back down the corridor and could hear Martha lumbering behind her, it took every fiber of her self-control not to look over her shoulder or break into a run. "I'll let you know what we intend to do with this place. I guess you've been careful."

"Careful?"

"Not letting any Muggles see you. Taking care of the place, making sure everything gets where it's supposed to go."

"What in heaven's name are you doing, girl?" shouted Goody Pruett as they walked past her portrait again. "Run! Fetch Aurors! Fetch the Regiment! Oh please, expunge my family's establishment of these Dark creatures! Our good name and fortune, ruined, ruined!"

Alexandra felt guilty leaving her there, even if she was just a portrait. "I know a Livia Pruett," she said.

Goody Pruett stopped mid-rant. "Livia?"

"Do you know her?"

"She and her sister came here once or twice. I haven't seen them since they were little girls," the portrait said wistfully.

Sister? Alexandra glanced at Martha, who was hunched over as she watched them angrily.

"Maybe," Alexandra said, "you might be happier somewhere other than here?"

"I'd be happier if she were somewhere other than here," Martha said. "I'd be ever so grateful if you'd take that piece of - I mean, your dear ancestor - with you."

"Why haven't you removed her yourself?" Alexandra asked.

Martha cackled laughter. "Oh, I've tried. But the old biddy is fire-proof, acid-proof, claw-, hammer-, and ax-proof. Only a member of the Pruett family can remove her." She clasped her hands together pleadingly. "Would you?"

"I can't carry a portrait that's bigger than me through the streets. Not right now." She looked up at Goody Pruett. "But I'll definitely be back."

Goody Pruett was actually silent until Alexandra and Martha were almost at the stairs. Then she called down the hallway: "She stole those boots!"

"Shut up!" screamed Martha. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, you lying smear of old paint and pus and poo!"

"She goes through all the chests brought to her by those dealers in illicitness and vice, and takes what she pleases!" Goody Pruett said gleefully. "Oh, you thought an old painting doesn't know what's actually going on here, didn't you, you festering bag of warts and boils?"

Martha shrieked with rage and raised her clawed hands as if she were going to rush at the portrait.

Alexandra proceeded downstairs without looking back. Martha came hurrying after her.

"Now, you mustn't believe a demented old painting," Martha said. "No need to mention such scurrilous accusations to, er, your father or anyone else, is there, dear?"

Alexandra turned around when she was at the front door.

"Those are nice-looking boots," she said.

"I wasn't going to keep them," Martha said. "I just wanted to wear them. It's not every day a body gets to try out a pair of Seven-League Boots."

"Seven-League Boots? Like in fairy tal- I mean, *real* Seven-League Boots?"

"Oh, they're rare as moonhen's teeth."

"And you tried to steal them."

"I wasn't stealing them, I was just borrowing them."

"So I'm sure if I told my father we should have this warehouse thoroughly searched for anything else you may have 'borrowed,' we wouldn't find anything."

Martha's face turned a paler shade of green. "Now, dear, that's really not necessary."

"Smugglers don't usually like it when you 'borrow' the merchandise." Alexandra knew this from TV. "But since you've been left here by yourself for years, I guess you've just gotten a little too comfortable. Just you and Goody Pruett. Wonder what else she'll tell me once she starts talking?"

"Oh, you're a cruel child, threatening an old woman like this!" Martha sounded desperate, but she was shuffling ominously closer until Charlie cawed and the hag backed away again.

"I really do like those boots," Alexandra said.

Martha's face wrinkled in misery, then she said, "Why, I'm sure no one would notice if you... borrowed them. Why don't you think of it as my little gift?"

With that, the hag sat heavily on the floor, thrust out one leg and then the other, and peeled the boots off of ankles as thick as hams. Once removed, they looked impossibly small next to the hag's huge bare feet. Alexandra thought they must magically resize to fit the wearer.

Martha stood up again, and despite her earlier protestations of seeking shelter from the cold, if she was bothered at all by standing on freezing-cold concrete in bare feet, she didn't show it. With the ingratiating smile of a grandmother holding out a tray of cookies, she offered Alexandra the boots. Alexandra took them at arm's length, staying aware of Martha's hands even while keeping her eyes locked on the hag's face.

"Remember," Alexandra said, "I live here. I don't want anyone shitting where I eat. Know what I mean?"

Charlie squawked. Martha smiled nervously. "You really are a daughter of Abraham Thorn, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." Alexandra threw her shoulders back and walked outside.

"Fly, Charlie," she whispered as she stepped out onto the sidewalk, and the raven took off. She crossed the street and kept walking. She felt eyes on the back of her neck, making her skin prickle.

Only when she was a block away and around the corner, no longer in sight of the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse, did she begin running. She ran all the way home, shed her jacket as she flew up the stairs, and opened her bedroom window to let Charlie in before slamming it shut again. Then she dropped the boots on the floor and sat on her bed and caught her breath. Cold sweat ran down her spine and she shivered for several minutes, while Charlie fluttered around saying, "Wicked! Wicked!"

This is Going to Suck

Alexandra sat down that night and wrote a long letter to Livia Pruett. She had to keep getting up to stretch and rub her neck - she could still feel the shaking Martha had given her.

She wrote about how she had grown up in Larkin Mills. She wrote about how she'd discovered she was a witch, and her first year at Charmbridge Academy. She wrote about discovering who her father was, and the years that followed: meeting her brother, meeting her sister, learning she had other sisters. Losing her brother.

"There are other things," she wrote, "that I can't tell you in a letter. But I think all of Abraham Thorn's daughters have been through pretty rough times, and I'm sure you have too. Maybe that's why you don't want to talk to him or any of us. But there are questions you can answer, and I'm not just asking because I'm curious. Here in Larkin Mills there's an old abandoned Regal Royalty Sweets & Confections warehouse which was owned by the Pruett family. You'd be surprised what's in it. Want to know more? Write back, or call me. If you don't, I'll keep asking questions. I may not ask you, but I'll ask other people, and that might mean other people coming to ask you questions. I respect your wishes if you want to stay away from the wizarding world. Once you tell me what I want to know, I'll leave you alone and never bother you again if that's what you want. But I'm asking you as your sister, please answer me."

She thought about how to end it, and finally just signed the letter: 'AQ,' before putting it in an envelope with a stamp and addressing it to Dr. L.J. Pruett, marked 'Personal,' c/o Pruett Family Practice in Milwaukee. She mailed it the next morning.

As the week went on, she continued walking around the neighborhood and even downtown, trying to see more hidden surprises with her witch's sight. Nothing else in Larkin Mills appeared to be concealing any wizardly secrets, and Alexandra was becoming increasingly upset by her failure to find her wand, and increasingly angry at her father. She suspected him of deliberately sending her on a wild goose chase. Perhaps he'd reappear just before she returned to school to give her wand back to her. Or maybe he'd hidden it somewhere too clever for her to find, and he'd let her return to school without a wand. Alexandra didn't even know what happened to a witch who lost her wand in the Muggle world.

She also wondered what she'd say to Diana Grimm when she showed up. She knew the Special Inquisitor was going to show up: she always did after she thought Alexandra might have spoken to her father. Maybe she should just tell Ms. Grimm about the hag and the Regal Royalty warehouse. She did not like the thought of the Dark Convention operating some sort of smuggling ring right here in Larkin Mills. But she utterly mistrusted the Wizard Justice Department and was loathe to cooperate with them.

Thursday evening, the Seaburys returned to Larkin Mills. Brian came to the door on New Year's Eve and asked Mrs. Green if Alexandra could go skating with him. Alexandra was acutely embarrassed by her mother's amused smile as the two of them left the house.

Alexandra waited until they were out of her mother's sight. With her ice skates slung over her shoulder, she turned on Brian. "Why did you ask her for permission like that?"

"To go skating?"

"Yes!"

He blinked at her. "Doesn't she need to know where we're going?"

"No! I mean, yes, but - that's not the point!"

"What's the point?" Brian stared at her helplessly, and she blew out an exasperated plume of breath and stalked ahead. He skidded to keep up with her, saying nothing until they were almost to the park with the city pond where everyone went to skate.

"I'm sorry?" he said, his voice making it half-apology, half-question.

"Whatever." She sat down on a bench and began taking off her boots and putting on her skates. She looked up at Brian, who was still befuddled and a little hurt. "Forget about it. It's okay. I've just got a lot on my mind."

He sat down next to her and began putting on his own skates. "All that stuff that's been happening for the last three years?"

"Yeah."

"Want to talk about it?" His face, earnest, a little anxious, reminded her of William. Brian's soft features were similar to the younger boy's, though he wasn't chubby, or quite as fair.

"Maybe later," she said. "Where's Bonnie, by the way?"

"Grounded, thank God. She was an incredible brat at Grandma's house.

Alexandra got to her feet. "Okay. I haven't skated in a while."

She had never been a great skater, but she'd never been a bad one, either. After a few circuits around the pond with Brian pacing her, she felt less likely to fall. There were lots of other people coming out to skate - teenagers and adults, mostly, as it was getting dark, though a few parents had brought younger children.

The town had changed, Alexandra thought. Or maybe she had just never paid attention to the community. Before she started going to Charmbridge, she'd been too young to be out this late. Now she was so used to brooms and winged horses and Apparition, she'd forgotten how much fun skating like a Muggle could be.

Only two things marred the evening. The first was when she heard something flap overhead and looked up too late to see it, but she was sure it had been a bird - probably a large, black one. Was Hagar spying on her? She was tempted to shout "Where's my wand?" Thus reminded of her still-missing wand, she fell into a less cheerful mood.

It became less cheerful yet when she saw Billy, Tom, Gordie, and several other teenagers lingering by the edge of the pond. Only Gordie was actually wearing skates, and when the others laughed derisively at him when he went out onto the ice, he quickly rejoined them and tossed off the ice skates. They saw Alexandra and Brian and pointed at them and began catcalling and shouting "Freak!"

"Ignore them," Brian said.

"Yeah, sure." Alexandra wished she had her wand, and knew it wouldn't matter. Without skates on, the other teens just stayed by the pond's edge making noise until a police officer whom Alexandra recognized strolled over. Billy and his friends walked away.

They skated a while longer, but with their moods both dampened a bit, Alexandra and Brian drifted back to the shore and hobbled off the ice to take off their skates. Brian was silent as they put their boots on.

"We're going to see the fireworks show at midnight," he said, after they began walking back to Sweetmaple Avenue.

"My mother and stepfather are both working, so I guess I'll see the fireworks from my bedroom window," Alexandra said.

Brian shuffled his feet. "I could ask my parents if you could come along..."

"Thanks, but you know your mother doesn't really like me."

"That's not true," he said, with absolutely no conviction.

Alexandra remembered the afternoons Mrs. Seabury had watched her while her parents were working, after their house burned down. Brian's mother had been doing the decent, neighborly thing, and Alexandra had rarely felt so miserable; even Vacation Bible School had made her feel less unwelcome. She said nothing, just shook her head at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry for everything, Alex. I wish I hadn't acted like I did when you... when you became a witch. I wanted to talk to you and tell you I was sorry, and I didn't know how. And things always seemed to go wrong... I mean, that... that magic stuff..." Alexandra stared at him as he stammered out his apology. "It freaked me out, okay? Especially after what almost happened to Bonnie. I know that wasn't really your fault, but I just... I was stupid. And I'm really sorry, and I'm sorry I didn't stand up for you when everyone called you a freak, and that my parents are so... judgmental."

Apropos of the moment, snow began to fall - not light fluffy snow, but cold, wet flakes that were almost ice.

"What happened to Bonnie... was my fault," she said. "And so's a lot of other stuff. Not everything - but your parents may not be wrong about me, Brian."

"I think they are," he said. He had taken her hands before she realized he was stepping closer to her. And suddenly his face was right in front of hers.

She'd never seen anyone look so nervous. And then he kissed her.

She backed away, confused and caught off-guard. Brian let go of her hands immediately.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, face crimson.

"It's okay." Alexandra brushed her bangs away from her forehead. They were getting long again, and now they were getting wet as snow clung to her hair. "I wasn't expecting..."

"We'd better go," he said. "It's starting to come down."

They walked in silence - Brian huddled inside his coat, unable to look at her, Alexandra trying to figure out what had happened and how she was supposed to feel about it. Did Brian want to be her *boyfriend* now? That was one thing that had never occurred to her in all the years she had known him. It was one thing to forgive him and be friends again, but to go from calling her a dangerous freak to *kissing* her? And didn't she already have a boyfriend? Thinking of Payton did not stir any feelings of guilt in her, only more confusion.

When they reached Sweetmaple Avenue, she said, "Brian, I don't know how to feel about this."

"You don't have to feel anything. I'm sorry - I shouldn't have done it."

"You're not going to get all weird and refuse to talk to me again, are you?"

He finally raised his head. "No."

"Listen, you and Bonnie have to stop talking about me being a witch. Sooner or later the wrong people will take it seriously. And I don't mean Billy Boggleston and his idiot friends."

"I don't talk about it. It's Bonnie - ever since, well, Old Larkin Pond... and the mall... and then when she followed you to the pond again -"

"That's not my fault."

"I know. Bonnie's just..." Brian made a vague, frustrated gesture with his gloved hand. "She still thinks all sorts of weird stuff goes on at Old Larkin Pond."

"It's just a pond, Brian." She paused. *It's just a pond.* "I'm an idiot."

"What?" He blinked away snow crystals clinging to his lashes.

"I know where my wand is."

He stared at her. "Old Larkin Pond? How -?"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Ssh."

"You aren't going to Old Larkin Pond *now*, are you?" His voice through her hand was muffled but still audible.

"No, of course not." She took her hand away. "Brian... thanks. I mean it. See you tomorrow?"

He nodded.

"Good night," she said.

She went into her house. Her mother had already started her evening shift at the hospital. Archie was waiting for her, dressed in his gray police sergeant's uniform, beneath a black poncho with reflective yellow stripes and a waterproof hat. "I was beginning to think I'd have to come get you," he said.

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

"Well, I'll be arresting drunk drivers all night," he said. "With this weather, be lucky if Claudia doesn't wind up busy at the hospital as well. You stay inside. You've got the numbers to call -"

"Jeez, Archie, I've only known what to do when I'm home alone for *years*! Of course I'm going to stay inside, where am I going to go?"

"Don't take that tone with me, Alex." This was such a familiar exchange over the last few years, he sounded almost affectionate when he said it. "Behave yourself." He straightened his hat.

"Yes, Archie," she said with exaggerated, sardonic politeness as he went out the door.

She peeked out the front window, waited until his police SUV had disappeared around the corner, and then grabbed a flashlight from the supply cupboard, ran upstairs, and put on her weatherproof cloak and charmed mud-repelling boots, pausing a moment to consider the Seven-League Boots sitting next to them, before deciding to leave them in her closet.

She looked out her window. The snow was lighter now. The neighbors' houses glowed with light, but no one was visible in their windows.

Which was the greater risk - being caught by Archie or some other patrol officer on the streets, or being caught on her broom by Diana Grimm? Pretty much all of the Larkin Mills Police Department would be on duty New Year's Eve, but the Office of Special Inquisitions couldn't be tracking her every movement if they didn't know about Martha at the Regal Royalty warehouse.

Charlie clacked disapprovingly as she took her broom out of her closet.

"You're coming too," she said.

Charlie screeched.

"I know, the weather sucks. But I need you." She thrust the broomstick at the bird, until Charlie hopped onto the end of it.

"Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes," Charlie said.

Alexandra opened her window and looked around. Still no sign of observers. She floated out the window on her broom, shut her window from the outside, and flew straight up until someone looking up from the ground wouldn't see more than a blurry shadow in the sky. Then she turned her broom toward the highway and shot off across Old Larkin.

A little snow was still coming down as Alexandra landed at the edge of Old Larkin Pond. It was dark; from here, the stars above were barely visible pinpoints of light. In winter time, the murky pond was frozen over and the smell of algae and decay hovering over it in

warmer months was absent. There wasn't much snow accumulation, so the ground was just cold, hard mud.

She swung her leg over her broom to dismount as Charlie landed on her shoulder.

"Keep an eye out, Charlie," she said. Charlie flew into the air, cawing reproachfully.

She walked out onto the ice, stepping carefully. Her boots made a crunching sound, but the ice felt solid, and it was rough enough not to be too slick.

How had she not known this was where her father would hide her wand? In a way, this was where her life as a witch had begun, where she had first entered the wizarding world.

She staggered to a halt and held out her hands as the ice cracked ominously beneath her. Carefully, she took out her flashlight and shined it on the frozen pond at her feet. A split in the ice extended from where she stood to the deepest part of the pond, where she could see the ice was thin and clear.

But the feeling she'd known only as an absence for days had been replaced by something as tangible as a hickory wand in her hand. Beneath the frozen surface, her wand lay at the bottom of Old Larkin Pond. She could feel it.

The ice cracked some more.

"Great," she muttered. Apparently finding her wand wasn't enough. Retrieving it would be a test, too.

She pointed her flashlight into the water, toward where she felt her wand. All she could see was green and brown. Her wand had no filigree or bands or jeweled inlays, as some wands did, nothing that would reflect light. Of course, it was made of wood, so it should float, but her father must have weighed it down somehow, or simply embedded it in the muck at the bottom.

Balancing precariously on the ice, she held out a hand. She wasn't holding her wand, but maybe it was close enough to count.

"*Accio wand*," she said. She figured when she told Diana Grimm about her father's visit, and his cruel prank, the Special Inquisitor might overlook the circumstances of her using magic again. But she wasn't really surprised when the wandless spell didn't work.

"Okay," she said. She closed her eyes and composed the last few words of a rhyme in her head. She'd been working on it since leaving her house, knowing she might face just such a situation.

"In the pond where my father hid you,

Rise from the mud as I bid you.

Reunited, witch and wand,

Rise from the mud, to my hand."

She made a dramatic flourish with her hand on the final line.

Nothing happened.

It had good meter, she thought. Okay, 'wand' and 'hand' didn't quite rhyme, but the effectiveness of doggerel verse had never seemed to particularly depend on the quality of her rhyming.

She clenched her fist in frustration, and ice splintered from one end of the pond to the other. She cried out and staggered backward, slipped and fell on her butt, then held very still as more fissures radiated away from her.

Charlie flew about crying, "Alexandra! Alexandra!"

"I'm okay," she whispered. Aside from a rapidly freezing behind.

She held out a hand again, willing the water to bubble up through the ice and bear her wand to the surface, willing it to come to her with all her might. She clawed the air dramatically, narrowed her eyes and tried to make the gestures of a wandless Summoning Charm, and threw all her will and concentration into making her wand *come to her*!

The ice cracked some more. She scooted backward, sliding on her butt.

"Father..." she said.

She almost expected he would appear then, and actually looked around. But she was still alone.

Slowly, carefully, she rose to her feet. She stared balefully at the ice for a long time. Then she turned and walked back to the shore.

Charlie landed on a dead tangle of brush a few yards away and watched as Alexandra took everything out of her pants pockets and transferred them to the pockets of her jacket. Then she took off her cloak and her jacket, folded them, and laid them next to her broom. She was shivering as she took off her boots, glad that the snow had finally stopped falling, but unfortunately that was because the temperature had dropped still further.

"Alexandra," Charlie said querulously.

"He wants me to *prove* myself," Alexandra said, clenching her teeth. "He wants to *test* me. Fine."

"Alexandra!" Charlie sounded more concerned as she took off her sweater. She was now wearing only her socks, pants, and a long-sleeved shirt.

"Maybe there's some clever magical way I'm supposed to do this!" she shouted into the night. "But I don't know how! So I'm going to do it the not-so-clever way!"

Only the sound of traffic from the Interstate answered her.

"Okay," she said. She took off her socks. She spent what seemed like a long time thinking, as the breeze bit into her and the cold ground felt like knives against her feet, before she began unbuttoning her shirt.

"Stupid!" Charlie said.

She peeled off her shirt, gasped at the cold, and then pulled off her pants. She was standing in nothing but her underwear, with the temperature close to zero degrees Fahrenheit.

She picked up her broom in one hand, the flashlight in the other. "You get back in the air, Ch-Charlie. I r-really really d-don't want anyone s-sneaking up on me now!"

"Crazy!" Charlie took off, but did not fly very high. As Alexandra eased herself onto the Twister, more grateful than ever for its cushioning charms but wishing she had one of the luxury brooms she'd heard about with built-in warming charms, Charlie continued flapping in a circle around her.

She floated to the point over Old Larkin Pond where she felt her wand most strongly, then slid off the broom, hanging from it as if doing chin-ups, with her feet dangling just over the ice. She raised her feet and brought them down, both heels slamming into and through the frozen surface of the pond. The ice disintegrated, splashing cold water that felt like acid against her feet and ankles.

Charlie repeated: "Crazy!"

Alexandra pulled herself back onto the broom until she could float it down to just a few inches above the surface of the water. Then she carefully stood up on the broom. It was a difficult balancing trick, not quite as hard as it appeared, thanks to the Twister's magical stability, but made more difficult by her shivering.

"One," she said, closing her eyes. "T-Two." *This is going to suck.* "Three!"

She took a deep breath and leaped into the water, plunging straight down, holding her flashlight in one hand.

She thought she was prepared for the cold. She had no idea just how cold cold could be. Old Larkin Pond was ice water, and in the instant she was submerged, she almost gasped all the air out of her lungs. Pain like nothing she had experienced since being Crucioed by John Manuelito stabbed her with long needles all the way to the bone. She grimly clamped her mouth shut to keep from screaming, slitted her eyes open, and curled into a ball as her feet touched the slimy, ice-cold mud at the bottom. Already it took every bit of her concentration to remember what she was supposed to be doing. The flashlight illuminated brown-black layers of muck embedded with branches, bottles, and cans, and just before it died - because it was not a waterproof flashlight - Alexandra saw a stick that was perfectly straight and smooth, the thing she'd been feeling since she first stepped out on the ice, and she reached out and snatched it from the mud, feeling triumphant as her wand came into her hand almost of its own volition.

She rose, straightening her legs and pushing off from the mud. Her head broke the surface and she made a sound that was half-moan, half-scream and grabbed the broom. It rose, carrying her with it, but she was only halfway out of the water when her fingers slipped. She was shivering too hard to hold on and she hit the water, one arm cracking through more ice. She floundered, trying to swim for the shore, but her thrashing hands and kicking legs just kept breaking more ice. She gulped a mouthful of frozen pond water and began sinking, choking, panicking. Her feet sank to the bottom, she kicked up desperately - and found herself standing thigh-deep in water.

Idiot! she thought. Old Larkin Pond at its deepest point probably did not come up past her head, and she was already in the shallows. Trembling violently, she grabbed her broom and threw it away from the pond, then wrapped her arms around herself and staggered to the shore. She could feel the water freezing to her skin already. She collapsed by her clothes. She had never been this cold in her life. Even wandering blindly through a blizzard when she was eleven hadn't been this bad. She was going to freeze to death. Her mind was blank. Charlie was screaming at her.

Someone shouted in her ear: "Alexandra!" Hands lifted her to her feet. Shivering, she tried to blink - it was difficult, because her eyelids were almost frozen shut - and then felt a stinging slap. Brian was standing in front of her, staring at her.

She slapped him back. He stepped back and put a hand to his face.

"I thought you were in shock," he said.

"What are you d-d-doing here?" she stammered, teeth chattering.

"Please, put your clothes on!" He moved his hand to cover his eyes. Alexandra stumbled over to where she had piled her clothes on the ground. She managed to get her pants on, only falling down once, and then her shirt, though her fingertips were too numb to button all the buttons. When Brian handed her her sweater and helped her wrap her cloak around herself, she didn't object, nor did she say anything as he wordlessly held onto her while, trembling, she slid her socks on and then thrust one foot, then the other into her boots. By this time she was still shivering with cold and miserably uncomfortable.

Charlie landed on her shoulder and she raised a hand to let the bird step onto her wrist, then threw her cloak over her familiar.

Brian asked, "Did you find your wand?"

"Yes."

He picked up her broom. "You're kidding me."

"What?"

"You actually...?"

"Yes." She would have snatched it from him, except she was too cold and she was holding Charlie.

"That was the dumbest thing I've ever seen. You could have died."

"I wouldn't have died. Even if you hadn't showed up. Speaking of which -"

"I know you. Of course you were going to go to Old Larkin Pond."

"And you followed me?" Her trembling drained the indignation from her voice.

"Oh, right, lecture *me* about doing something stupid."

She tried to glare at him, but her teeth were chattering. "So, you waited until I took my clothes off and jumped in the water?"

"I only got here in time to see you coming out of the water. If I'd seen what you were going to do I would have tried to stop you."

"Oh, really?"

"Do you really want to stand here arguing?"

"No." She started walking. Brian followed, still carrying her broom.

"So, Archie threw your wand into Old Larkin Pond?" Brian asked.

"Let's not talk about it right now."

"You really flew from your house to here on this?"

"I mean it, Brian."

He said nothing until they reached the freeway underpass, and heard sirens not far away.

"Some car accident already," he said.

She nodded. It sounded like the sirens were between them and their street. "If any cops see a couple of kids on the street - and most of the cops know me -"

Brian sighed. "I'm so dead."

"How did you get out of your house anyway?"

"I went out my window."

"Seriously?" Alexandra would have grinned if her teeth weren't chattering. "Your parents are totally going to blame me for corrupting you."

"I was hoping I'd be back before we go see the fireworks."

She reached out and took the Twister from him. "We can be."

He stared at the broom. "Oh, no way."

"It can carry two."

"You *are* crazy!"

"Trust me." With less grace than usual, she mounted her broom and allowed it to lift her off the ground. Charlie hopped out from beneath her cloak and walked sideways along the length of the broom.

Brian's eyes were bulging. "Isn't this... against the rules?"

"Yes. You have no idea how much trouble I'll be in if I get caught. So, want to risk it, or want to explain to your parents what you were doing with me at Old Larkin Pond?"

It was not an easy decision for Brian. "Are you sure about this?"

"Get on. Just swing your leg over. It's not as uncomfortable as it looks - it's magic. Now put your arms around me and hang on."

Brian followed her instructions, and was very careful as he slid his arms around her waist, but as she pulled up on the broom and they rose into the air, he tightened his grip until she said, "Brian! Relax!"

"Oh my God, oh my God," he mumbled as they flew away from the Interstate and soared over Old Larkin. She felt his face pressed against her shoulder and he was trembling almost as hard as she was. "I must be out of my mind, we're going to die..."

"Just close your eyes," she said. "We'll be home in minutes." Below, she saw police cars and an ambulance with lights flashing. If any of the officers or paramedics below had looked up, they might have seen the red and blue light reflecting from her face, though this high up, they would hardly have been able to make out what they were seeing. It was probably some stupid drunk driver, she thought, and pointed her broom at Sweetmaple Avenue and flew onward.

She descended into the Seaburys' back yard with a drop that she barely noticed, even chilled as she was, but Brian almost fell over when he dismounted. He swallowed, and for a moment she thought he might throw up.

"You okay?" she asked.

He nodded. "You're shivering like crazy."

"Don't worry about me." She hesitated, then leaned forward and kissed his cheek. She didn't pull away for a second, until she realized their cheeks were pressed together, and neither of them was moving, and then she stepped back, feeling all sorts of fluttery warmth inside that confused her and was the last thing she wanted to think about right now. Brian looked just as confused, and his cheeks glowed warm enough to make the snow steam against them.

"Get inside before your parents catch you," she said.

"Go home before you get hypothermia," he said.

She got on her broom, looked around, and took off again. From Brian's back yard to her own was more like one giant leap than a flight. She hovered before her bedroom window and opened it - striking stiff, frozen fingers against the sill several times before she finally managed to bend them sufficiently to get the window open - then practically tumbled across her desk. Charlie flew inside and

directly to the cage sitting under a heating vent. Alexandra shut the window, pulled down the blinds, and quickly disrobed. She left her freezing wet underwear and the rest of her clothes on the floor, and didn't even bother to put her broom back in her closet. She towed herself dry, changed into pajamas, put on her thickest, fuzziest robe, and barely managed to flip the light off before collapsing into her bed and wrapping herself in her blankets. She shivered and shook until finally, warmth seeped into her, possibly aided by her wand, which she clutched to her body as she curled up in bed.

Eventually, she drifted off to sleep.

Someone was shaking her. "Alexandra."

She moaned.

The shaker persisted. It was a gentle but insistent hand on her shoulder, and the voice said, "Alexandra," again.

"Mmmgowasleep," she said.

"Alexandra."

She opened her eyes. It was Archie's voice. She rolled over, and squinted at the light shining through her bedroom door from the little upstairs hallway. Archie had not turned on the light in her room, but he was kneeling next to her bed. With the light behind him, she could only see him in shadowy outline, still wearing his cold-weather poncho and hat.

His voice had been firm, insistent but not angry. So she wasn't in trouble. Her sleepy mind struggled toward wakefulness. Her stepfather almost never came into her room. If he was angry at her, he'd pound on her door or open it and yell at her, but she couldn't remember any time since she was a little girl that he'd come into her room while she was asleep to wake her up.

All of this came together in her mind, and the realization that it signified something out of the ordinary, something serious, something very wrong, brought her fully awake in an instant. She sat up and said, "Mom!"

Archie held out a hand. "No, it's not your mother, she's fine."

"What...?"

"It's your friend, Bonnie. Bonnie Seabury. She was hit by a car earlier tonight."

"Bonnie?" Alexandra was wide awake now, but no less confused.

"Claudia called me from the hospital." Archie paused. "She says Bonnie's condition is... very serious. Her brother and her parents are there now. Claudia thought you might want to come."

Feeling a chill worse than her icy bath in Old Larkin Pond, Alexandra nodded mutely.

Archie stood up. "Get dressed. I'll be waiting downstairs."

Charlie made a long, mournful whistling sound. Archie walked out of her room and closed the door behind him.

And I Will Treat With Any Power

Alexandra sat shotgun in the police SUV, looking out the window as Archie drove through Larkin Mills. She shivered despite the fact that Archie had the heater on full blast. She still felt chilly after her dip in Old Larkin Pond, and she was glad that at least she'd kept her jacket dry.

Pops and thumps echoed from above as they drove past the park, and a shower of green and gold sparks rained down. The fireworks had started.

"How did it happen?" Alexandra asked.

"She was on the streets all by herself in Old Larkin." Archie shook his head. "No idea what she was doing there."

Alexandra felt an icy stab in her guts.

"Dale was on the scene," Archie went on. "The driver was babbling about *owls*."

"Owls?"

"He claimed a bunch of owls flew in front of his car and that's why he didn't see Bonnie. He actually tested clean on the breathalyzer, but they took him downtown, of course. I'm sure he's on something."

"How bad is Bonnie?"

Archie was silent for half a block. More fireworks illuminated the sky. "Claudia couldn't tell me. Just that it's serious."

Alexandra closed her eyes. She had gone to Old Larkin Pond. Brian had followed her. Bonnie must have followed Brian. What was wrong with them? Idiots, both of them.

They were silent for the rest of the drive. Larkin Mills Hospital was small but usually busy, since it was the only hospital serving the entire region. An ambulance pulled in as Archie parked in one of the '*Police and Emergency Vehicles Only*' spots. Alexandra got out and walked with her stepfather inside.

She'd been here many times, but never when someone she knew was hospitalized. A few nurses nodded to her and Archie.

They found the Seaburys in a corridor outside the Intensive Care Unit. Mrs. Seabury was leaning against her husband. Brian was huddled into himself, hands in his pockets, staring down at his feet. An odd wave of relief crossed his face when he looked up and saw Alexandra and Archie.

Archie took off his hat as they approached the family. "Kenneth, Jane, I'm very sorry about Bonnie. Claudia told me about the accident. How is she?"

Mr. Seabury inclined his head toward the room. "Comatose." His voice was flat. "Cranial hematoma, other injuries... we have to wait and see, the doctor said."

Mrs. Seabury let out a muffled sound. Alexandra felt numb and sick, both at once.

She'd never particularly liked Brian's mother. Mrs. Seabury had never been mean to her, but neither had she ever really been friendly. Now, all Alexandra could say was, "I'm really sorry. I... hope she'll be okay."

Mrs. Seabury nodded. "Thank you."

"Thank you for coming, Alexandra," Mr. Seabury said. "I'm sure Brian is glad to see you."

Brian did look glad to see her. She walked over to him. "You okay?" she murmured.

He shook his head, and looked around as if anxious to be somewhere else.

"I'm actually still on duty," Archie said. He looked at Alexandra, and back at the Seaburys. "I can take Alexandra home, or leave her here if you don't mind her staying with you. Claudia will check in on you now and then, but she's also on duty, so..."

Mr. and Mrs. Seabury hesitated. Then Mr. Seabury said, "Alexandra can stay with us. We don't mind."

Archie nodded. He turned to his stepdaughter. "Claudia will take you home when her shift ends, unless you absolutely have to leave

before then. Can you handle yourself?" he asked, with that *Behave yourself* look.

Alexandra fought her every instinct to bristle or roll her eyes, and just nodded. "Yes, Archie."

He patted her on the shoulder, then gave Brian a squeeze on the shoulder as well before walking out.

Alexandra thought maybe Brian would want to sit down - she was hoping so, since she was actually quite tired - but he said, "Want to get a soda or a candy bar?" gesturing at the vending machines down the hall.

She tried to figure out what was going through his mind. "Sure."

"We're gonna get something to eat, okay?" he said to his parents. They both nodded, not really paying attention. Alexandra followed him down the corridor. When they reached the machines, rather than feeding money into one of them, Brian took her by the shoulders and pulled her into the alcove between the machines and the door.

"Thanks for coming," he said.

"Of course I came." Alexandra wondered if he was about to burst into tears or collapse against her or something. She was not sure what she was supposed to do.

"They said..." He gulped. His eyes glistened. "I heard the doctors talking to my parents. They... her chances... they're not good."

The icy spear in Alexandra's guts stabbed upward, pricking against her heart. "I'm sorry," was all she could think to say.

He looked around, making sure no one else was nearby, before asking in a whisper, "Did you bring your wand?"

"My... wand?" He kept gazing into her eyes, hands still on her shoulders waiting for an answer, so she said, "Yes. But..."

His expression became desperately eager. "So... you can do something, right?"

Alexandra didn't say anything. A nurse walked past, glanced at them and down the corridor at the Seaburys, and continued on.

"I mean magic," Brian whispered, once the nurse was gone.

"I know what you meant," Alexandra said.

"They don't let anyone but family in, and not even us right now, but..." Brian swallowed. "You can get in somehow, right? If you have to - I don't know how it works..."

"How it works? Brian, I can't do anything."

He cocked his head, as if he hadn't heard correctly. "What do you mean, you can't do anything? You can *fly*!"

"On a broom. That's different."

"You were walking around the same day you broke your leg."

"It's not that easy. I can't just wave my wand and make anything happen. There are rules -"

Brian reacted as if she'd slapped him. His face darkened and his hands dropped from her shoulders. "Rules? Rules?" His voice rose. "All of a sudden *you're* worried about following rules?"

"No, that's not -"

"You've always done whatever the hell you want whenever you want - since when do you care about *rules*? Are you kidding me? When have you ever cared about anything or anyone else, let alone following rules? Just once, I ask you to do something and you're telling me it's *against the rules*? I guess you can use magic when you break your leg doing one of your stupid stunts, but when my sister is *dying*, what, you don't want to *get in trouble*?"

She was unprepared for this, and she was tired and confused and in shock. She couldn't hold back her own anger. "Oh, right, for the last three years I've been a *freak*, a dangerous *witch*! *Magic isn't real*, remember? And now suddenly when you want something, I'm supposed to be your personal genie?"

She was boiling mad now, but Brian's anger dissipated as quickly as it had come. His shoulders slumped, and he said, "It's Bonnie, Alex,"

in the small voice of the boy she'd played with as a child. "It's my sister." Tears spilled down his cheeks.

Alexandra's anger evaporated too, just like that.

"Brian," she said quietly, "I don't know healing magic. Not for things like this. I didn't heal my own leg. I really can't just wave my wand and perform miracles. It doesn't work like that."

"Can't you try?" he pleaded.

She stared at him numbly. He turned away from her and walked back to where his parents were still holding each other. He sat down on a bench and put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands.

Alexandra walked over and sat down next to him. After a minute, she put an arm around him. His shoulders were shaking. She leaned against him. A little while later, Mr. and Mrs. Seabury sat down, too, and they were all silent, listening to the noise of nurses and doctors moving around, occasional announcements on the PA system, and a beeping box in Bonnie's room.

Alexandra hadn't taken her jacket off despite the warmth inside the hospital. She didn't quite nod off, but her head dipped now and then, and her eyes closed and she hovered between sleep and wakefulness. Someone touched her arm, and she looked up into her mother's concerned face.

"Is it time to go yet?" she asked.

Claudia Green shook her head. She was in her nurse's scrubs. She spoke very quietly, as the Seaburys were all asleep: Brian with his head against the wall behind him, Mr. Seabury slumped forward, and Mrs. Seabury leaning against her husband.

"A couple more hours," she mouthed.

Alexandra nodded. She looked at Bonnie's room, and back at her mother. "How serious is her condition, really?"

"Critical."

Alexandra stood up, very carefully, making sure not to jostle Brian. She stepped a few paces away with her mother.

"Is she going to die?" she whispered.

"I don't know, Alex." Her mother's expression was sadder than she'd ever seen.

"That bad?"

Her mother nodded.

They stood there, silently, then her mother said, "I'm not on duty in this ward. I have to go." She gave Alexandra a gentle hug. "I'm so sorry, Alex."

Alexandra watched her mother walk away, then looked up and down the corridor for other hospital staff. There were none. She crept past the Seaburys on the hard hospital bench, and looked around again when she reached the door to Bonnie's room. No one was watching. She slipped inside.

The lights were at half-brightness, enough for nurses and doctors to walk in without bumping into anything. Bonnie was a small, motionless figure hooked up to machines, with tubes inserted everywhere. Alexandra would never have known it was her, cocooned as she was in medical equipment, her face and body swathed in bandages.

Alexandra walked with soft, small steps to the side of Bonnie's bed, and stared down at the bandaged face. She took a deep breath and laid her fingertips, very gently, on the hand lying at the girl's side. Her other hand clenched her wand in her pocket. She said:

"By all the power that I hold, all the magic at my command,

Let this spell be true and bold, the greatest working of my hand.

Let the Most Deathly Power leave you be,

Let him pass on, or face me,

Keep the silence of the Stars Above unbroken,

Keep your fate by them unspoken,

And I will treat with any Power

That will offer to restore you,

And I will stand ready before you

To protect you, if Death comes for you."

With each line she spoke, she felt her mind sharpen, and the last words came out as if she were working a proper spell, one she knew like any incantation she'd cast at school. It felt like she'd done something, but her mind was in such a state, she knew she could just be feeling what she wanted to feel.

Bonnie lay quietly in her bed, and her monitors kept beeping and chirping.

Alexandra stood there looking down at the girl for another minute, then padded to the door and slipped out. Mr. Seabury had woken up, but he was looking at his wife, and when he turned to see Alexandra standing in the corridor, he just blinked blearily at her.

Alexandra walked back to the bench and was about to sit down next to Brian again when she remembered the card she had found in her parents' closet.

I can't wave my wand and perform miracles, she thought. But I didn't heal my own leg.

"I'm going to use the restroom," she said to Mr. Seabury. He nodded, probably without even hearing her. She walked outside instead, standing in the cold night where she could see yet another ambulance bringing in some unfortunate victim of New Year's Eve (now New Year's Day) revelry.

Her wallet and cell phone were still in the pockets of her jacket. She took both out, and retrieved Dr. Pruett's card. She turned it over and dialed the hand-written number on the back.

The phone at the other end rang five times before someone answered. It was a man, so when he said, in a very grumpy voice, "Yes?" it took her a moment to reply.

"May I please speak to Livia Pruett?" she said.

"Is this a patient? Dr. Pruett isn't on call tonight and you shouldn't be using her home number, however you got it."

"It's not a patient, but it is an emergency. Please, I'm sorry for waking you up, but I need to speak to her."

"Who is this?" demanded the voice.

Alexandra paused. "Tell her it's her sister."

There was no sound for a long time. Alexandra feared he'd hung up. Finally, she heard a woman's voice, just as annoyed but less sleepy. "Who is this?" she asked in a whisper that was almost a hiss.

"It's Alexandra."

Livia was silent a moment. Then she said, "Alexandra. I received your letter." Another pause. "How did you get this number?"

"Never mind that right now. I need something from you."

"Alexandra, I was planning to answer your letter. I was. But do you know it's three o'clock in the morning? And you called me *at home*?"

"I'm at a hospital," Alexandra said. "I have a friend here. She's dying."

This resulted in another pause before Livia said, "Alexandra..."

"She's eleven years old. She was hit by a car. The doctors say her chances aren't good. I tried to use magic to save her, but I have no idea if it will do anything."

"You - how could you know enough magic to save someone?"

"I don't. That's why I'm calling you."

Alexandra expected another long silence, and she got one. Then Livia said, "I can't do that."

"You can't, or you won't?"

"Alexandra, magic can't save everyone. Even Healers can't perform miracles. Without knowing what your friend's condition is, I can't even tell you whether it's possible I could do anything for her."

"Then come and look."

"I can't do that, Alexandra."

"Why, because it's inconvenient? Because you don't want any contact with me? Because you might get in trouble? You must make decisions like this all the time, I bet - who to save, who not to save."

"It's not that simple."

"But sometimes you do, don't you?"

"What you're suggesting would be completely illegal -"

"Right, completely against the laws of the Confederation. The International Statute of Secrecy, etcetera, etcetera. Except I was there when you were talking to Diana Grimm, remember? You have saved patients - your patients. You break the rules. When it suits you, when it's someone you care enough about, and when you can, you use your magic. You're a Healer *and* a doctor, and you don't like letting people die when you can save them, do you?"

"Alexandra -"

"Well, this is someone I care about. And if I knew enough magic to save her, I would - I'd let them arrest me or break my wand or do whatever they'll do to me, but I wouldn't let her die if I could save her. Just like you wouldn't."

"Alexandra -"

"So I told you in my letter I was only asking you to answer that one question and then I'd leave you alone forever if you want, but I'm asking for this instead. If being sisters doesn't matter to you, if me begging you for help because you're my sister doesn't matter, then think of it this way - just do this one thing that you've done for other people, just save an eleven-year-old girl who doesn't deserve to die just because she knows me, and I'll leave you alone. You'll never hear from me again. I'm sorry Diana Grimm brought me to you and disturbed your peaceful Wandless life. That wasn't my idea. But I'm not going to pester you for the rest of your life. If you want to pretend you don't have any sisters, fine - you don't know any of us, why should you care about us? But I'm asking you for this one favor. Just this once. Please."

This time, the silence stretched out until Alexandra wondered if Livia were still on the phone. A siren nearby caught her attention. An ambulance rolled out onto the street, off to fetch someone else who'd been hit by a car, or run off the road, or maybe been in a fight or had a heart attack or tried to commit suicide, all the million things that could happen to Muggles, some of them fatal, some of them fixable, some not.

Livia said, "You don't know what you're asking, Alexandra. You really don't."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't." Livia's tone was sharper this time, so Alexandra didn't reply.

After a short silence, Livia said, "It will take me some time to get there. I can't Apparate all the way to Larkin Mills."

"Her name is Bonnie Seabury. She's in the ICU. She's in critical condition, and I don't know how much time she's got. So, you know, whenever you can get here, but sooner would be better." And after another long pause, Alexandra said, "Thank you."

"Don't thank me until we know if I can do anything." Livia hung up.

Alexandra let out a long breath, and watched it mist and drift to the ground. She dropped her phone back into her pocket and walked inside. Brian had woken up. She sat down next to him.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "What I said earlier..."

"It's all right."

They sat together for a time, and then she whispered, "I tried. I tried to do something. I don't know if it will work. I can't promise anything. But I tried."

Neither of them spoke, and Alexandra dozed off.

She woke up when someone shook her. Her eyes snapped open.

Dr. Pruett was leaning over her. She was wearing a white doctor's coat over a blouse and knee-length skirt, and her dark hair was tied back. Her glasses were perched against the very bridge of her nose. She looked very professional and medical, except that she wasn't wearing a name tag. Alexandra opened her mouth, and Livia put a finger to her lips.

To her left, Brian was asleep, as were his parents. Alexandra got up, trying not to awaken Brian. Livia seized her arm above the elbow and dragged her to the door in front of Bonnie's room.

"Don't say anything," Livia whispered, holding up a finger. Her expression was stony, and her voice was hard even at such a soft volume. "Just listen and nod. I'm going to go in there and do what I can do. You keep a lookout, and knock gently on the door to warn me if anyone is coming. I'll do my best for your friend, but I cannot and will not make any promises. When I'm done, I'll leave. We won't say good-bye, and you will not call me again, not even if your friend or your boyfriend or your sister or your mother is dying. Do you understand? I'm going to do this, and then you're going to respect my wishes and leave me alone."

Alexandra could have burned a hole through her sister with her stare. Livia's stony expression faltered, just for a second, but her mouth remained implacably set. Slowly, Alexandra nodded.

Livia opened the door and walked into Bonnie's room. Alexandra stood with her back to the door, but now and then she looked over her shoulder. Livia was doing something with her wand, and once took a small glass vial out of a pocket inside her coat. There was no sound. Alexandra suspected Livia had cast a silencing spell of some sort.

Ten minutes later, Alexandra's mother came up the corridor, still wearing her nurse's scrubs beneath her coat. The Seaburys were still asleep, though Brian was stirring. Alexandra tapped lightly on the door behind her. Livia came to the door and exited the room.

"When the Trace Office questions you, you don't mention me," Livia said. "Do you understand?"

"Is Bonnie going to live?" Alexandra asked.

Brian was sitting up and looking at them, puzzled. Alexandra's mother slowed to a halt. The two women saw each other, and both turned white.

"Livia?" said Alexandra's mother.

Mr. and Mrs. Seabury were stirring, too. Brian just kept watching the scene, confused.

"Claudia," said Livia. She looked down at Alexandra. "You set this up."

"No, I didn't," Alexandra said.

"Livia," her mother said again, stepping toward them in shock. "What are you doing here?"

Livia closed her eyes.

"Is Bonnie all right?" Brian asked hoarsely.

Dr. Pruett opened her eyes, and was suddenly all professional brusqueness. "I need to find Dr. Stevens so he can update her status," she said to the Seaburys, "but I'm cautiously - very cautiously - optimistic. I would recommend all of you go home and get some rest. Please excuse me - Dr. Stevens or whoever is on call for him at the moment -"

"Dr. Wakeman," Alexandra's mother murmured.

"Dr. Wakeman," said Livia, "is really the only one who should be talking to you." Without letting the flustered Seaburys say anything else, she walked away.

"I need to take Alexandra home now," Mrs. Green said. "But I'm going to have a word with the doctor first. Excuse me." She grabbed Alexandra by the wrist and dragged her after Dr. Pruett. Alexandra was as speechless as Brian and his parents, who watched them go with stunned incomprehension.

Livia knew they were following her, but no one said anything until they reached the parking lot outside. It was cold and Alexandra felt it immediately - she hadn't zipped up her jacket and the chill was still deep in her bones after diving into Old Larkin Pond. All around them

were cars with frosting-like layers of snow on their roofs and hoods in an otherwise empty parking lot.

"What are you doing here?" Alexandra's mother asked.

Livia turned to face her. "Ask your *daughter*."

Stricken, Alexandra's mother said, "Alexandra... you brought Livia here? How did you -?"

"How do you know her?" Alexandra pulled the business card out of her pocket and showed it to her mother. "Why did you have her card and her phone number?"

Her mother recoiled. "Where did you - were you looking in our closet?"

"Ground me. *How do you know each other?* You've *known* about her all this time! You *knew* I had other sisters! You've *always* known! How much have you been hiding from me? How could you not tell me?"

"You had no right," her mother said. She was white beneath the fluorescent lights of the parking lot.

"*You* had no right!" Alexandra shouted.

"She's right," Livia said, though it wasn't clear who she meant.

"Don't talk to me about rights!" Alexandra's mother said to Livia. "Where have you been all this time?"

"You knew where I was," Livia said.

"And now you decide to show up?"

"It wasn't my choice."

"Did Alexandra summon you magically? Did she force you to come?"

"You could say that."

"Wait a minute!" Alexandra said.

"Why did you come, Livia? Why did you come?" To Alexandra's horror, her mother was crying.

"To save a little girl," Livia said quietly. Tears ran down her face also. "Because our sister asked me to."

There was a space of three heartbeats before Alexandra's mind caught up to each word.

"Wait, what?" she said.

The two women stared at each other, their tears freezing on their cheeks.

"You must have known this would happen someday," Livia said. "Did you really think it wouldn't?"

"Shut up," Claudia said.

"Even if I never came, she's obviously beyond your ability to control."

"I wasn't trying to control her, I was trying to protect her -"

"You were trying to protect *yourself*!"

"HELLO!" Alexandra shouted. "I'm standing right here! What are you two talking about?"

Livia finally looked at Alexandra. "Ask her who your oldest sister is."

Claudia raised a hand. What she meant to do wasn't clear to Alexandra - reach for her? Stop Livia from saying anything? But it was a gesture of uselessness and futility. Alexandra stepped back and said, "What is she talking about?"

Claudia dropped her hand. "Me. She's talking about me."

Alexandra waited for this to make sense, but it didn't. "What?"

"I'm not your mother, Alexandra. I'm your sister." Claudia took a deep breath. "Abraham Thorn is my father, too."

Alexandra couldn't stop staring with incomprehension, even after the words sank in. She shivered.

"Alex," Claudia said, and stepped toward her. Alexandra backed away. "Alexandra... I'm sorry. Let's go home. I - I'll explain. I knew I'd have to someday -"

"No kidding?" Alexandra turned around and walked away from her.

"Alex, come back here," Claudia said.

"You're not my mother!" Alexandra shouted. And she began running.

Lies My Mother Told Me

It took Alexandra half an hour to cool off, and another half hour of wandering around - staying off main streets and keeping to shadows, especially when she saw a police car go by - before she realized she was only getting more cold and tired. She was tempted to simply not return home, but she'd left everything but her wand in her room... and she still had so many unanswered questions.

While she was walking around, her phone rang three times before she turned it off. No doubt her mother - no, her *sister* - was leaving angry messages.

The sky in the east was beginning to turn pale by the time Alexandra turned her footsteps in the direction of home.

She wished she had worn the Seven-League Boots. Sweetmaple Avenue was only a couple of miles from the hospital, but that seemed like a very long way to walk in the freezing cold. Oh, sure, she could call home. Archie would probably pick her up within minutes. But she preferred to walk. It allowed her to think, though she was tired and her thoughts had not arrived anywhere in particular when she finally turned down her street. The sun was just coming up when she walked through the door of her house.

Claudia was sitting in the living room drinking coffee. She stood up and said, "Oh, thank God," and moved toward Alexandra.

Alexandra held out her palm, and Claudia stopped.

"Who's my mother?" Alexandra asked.

Claudia was haggard and pale and looked even more tired than Alexandra, but she spoke in a collected, almost rehearsed way. "Before we go further: I know you're angry, and you have a right to be, but I am your mother in every way that matters, and that means I can still ground you or keep you from ever returning to Charmbridge Academy. Don't you ever run away like that and not answer my phone calls again. Archie is searching every street between here and the hospital looking for you."

Alexandra said nothing while Claudia dialed Archie's cell phone. "She's here," she muttered. "No - no, it's okay. Yes, I'm sure. I'll see you when you get off-duty. Yes. Thanks." She hung up, tossed the

phone on the couch, and sat back down, with a hand over her forehead.

"Does Archie know?" Alexandra asked.

Claudia took her hand away from her forehead. "No."

"Where's Livia?"

"She left."

"Do you and she have the same mother?"

Claudia hesitated. "No."

"Who's my mother?"

"That's a long story."

"What, was I created in a lab or something?"

"Don't be silly. Please, sit down Alexandra."

"No. Answer my questions."

Claudia sat up. "Stop talking to me like that. I'm -"

"Not my mother."

Lines deepened in Claudia's face. For the first time, Alexandra could see the resemblance to their father. "Do you want to hear the truth or not?"

"Will you tell me the truth? Seems to me you've been lying to me my whole life. Why should I expect you're going to tell the truth now?" Alexandra felt herself becoming more spiteful and unreasonable with every word, and she couldn't stop herself. She was angry and confused and all she could do was lash out. When Claudia didn't say anything, she felt worse still, and angrier, too.

"Are you a witch?" she asked. "Wandless, like Livia?"

Claudia didn't say anything for long enough to make Alexandra begin simmering again, then she answered, with an unmistakable

note of bitterness: "No. Don't tell me you haven't figured it out yet, Alexandra."

Alexandra waited. Claudia sipped from her coffee, set her cup down, let Alexandra wait a little longer, and said, "My mother died when I was little. Our father married Desirée Pruett, and I was raised by her. She was the only mother I ever knew - a good mother - and Livia was my little sister. Until I was ten years old."

Her eyes glistened now, and Alexandra, who could not remember ever seeing Claudia cry before tonight, found her resolve crumbling, and her voice drained of anger. "Is that when they found out you... couldn't do magic?"

"That's when Desirée was killed by Aurors."

Alexandra gasped. "Killed by Aurors?"

"That's what Father told me. I wasn't there. I never knew exactly what happened. A tragic accident, everyone said, but I think that's when Abraham Thorn really became an enemy of the Confederation, even if he wasn't the Enemy until you were born." Claudia's voice lowered to a whisper. "Livia was there. She saw her mother die."

Alexandra would have sat down now, but clung to just enough stubborn anger to remain where she stood.

Claudia continued. "But yes, everyone knew by then that Abraham Thorn's first-born child was a Squib. We suspected it for years - I'd never shown any magic throughout my childhood. It was obvious *you* weren't a Squib by the time you were two." Claudia laughed mirthlessly, and more of Alexandra's righteous fury drained away.

"After her mother died, Livia was raised by her grandparents, but - well, the Pruett's were an old, traditional pureblood family. If I had actually been a Pruett myself, maybe they would have taken me in anyway, but... Squibs were considered shameful among the Elect. A sign of iniquity, something that went wrong in the blood."

"They separated you from Livia? They wouldn't let you stay with her?"

"What would I have done anyway, when Livia went off to Charmbridge a couple of years later?" Claudia shrugged. "Squibs

are usually sent to live in the Muggle world, or so I've been told. Father found a Muggle family willing to take care of me, and I left the wizarding world behind."

"He just dumped you in a foster family?"

"They weren't bad people. Father checked on me to make sure I was doing well. I was a good student. I graduated high school, and got into a pre-med program." Claudia laughed again, still without humor. "Imagine, years later, Livia being the doctor."

Alexandra said nothing.

"And then one day, after I hadn't seen him in over a year, Father came to me, and he brought a baby. My sister. He couldn't explain what had happened, except that he was a wanted man, the Wizard Justice Department was after him, and for some reason, he thought you'd be safer in the Muggle world. Or maybe he just didn't know anyone else who'd take you in. It was frightening and confusing, especially when the Inquisitors showed up literally on his heels, but what else could I do? Turn you over to foster care?"

Alexandra sensed unspoken gulfs in Claudia's narrative - years brushed over, details omitted - but forced herself to concentrate on the questions of greatest urgency. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I made our father swear to keep the wizarding world away from me. And I made *him* swear to keep away from me. They leave Squibs alone, mostly. Once they knew that Father never visited, the Inquisitors stopped bothering us. I just wanted a normal life." Claudia closed her eyes. "But I knew I couldn't keep the wizarding world away from you forever."

"So you thought you'd just tell me lies all my life, make our father promise not to tell me the truth either, and hope I'd never find out?"

"No, I just -"

"*Who's my mother?* Is she dead, too? Do you even know?"

"She's not dead."

Alexandra stood still, waiting, until Claudia said, "You've met her. She's at Charmbridge Academy."

Alexandra shook her head. "No. Oh, no."

Claudia stood up. "I'm sorry. You're right, you should have known, you should have been told."

"You think?" Shaking, Alexandra drew her wand.

Claudia's mouth dropped open. "Alexandra, what are you doing?"

Alexandra pointed her wand upstairs. "*Accio broom!*" Her Twister came clattering down the stairs, bumping against walls and knocking cups off a bookcase before it flew into her hand.

"*Accio backpack!*" she said. Claudia gasped and ducked as Alexandra's backpack flew into the room. Alexandra caught it and slung it over her shoulders with one motion while walking toward the door.

Upstairs, Charlie cried: "Alexandra!"

"I'm sorry, Charlie," Alexandra said, "not this time."

"What are you doing?" Claudia demanded.

"Going to see my *mother*."

"What? Are you out of your mind? Alex, you can't!"

Alexandra threw the door open, stepped out onto the porch, took one look up and down the street in the dim early dawn, and launched herself into the air.

If not for her anger, Alexandra might have frozen solid astride her broom, and so she held onto her anger, nurtured it and fanned it, all the way north. From her pack she retrieved her cloak and put it on, but it only kept the wind off, not the cold. She didn't know how to fly directly to Charmbridge, so she followed the Automagicka, which meant flying all the way to Chicago and then cruising along the edge of Lake Michigan. The sun was up now, but the winds were stronger and the air was colder. She hadn't seen any other flying brooms, but she didn't dare cast a Warming Spell. She didn't think Diana Grimm could track her broom, but the Trace Office might be looking for her even now.

Or maybe they didn't know or care where she was. It wasn't as if her mother - *Claudia*, she corrected herself; it was going to take a while to stop thinking of Claudia as her mother - was going to call Ms. Grimm. She'd be glad Alexandra had left. Now at last she was relieved of the unwanted burden that had been dumped on her fourteen and a half years ago.

Some part of her knew she was being foolish, especially when she had to put her hands inside her cloak because her fingers were turning numb, but anger and indignation kept her mind off the cold.

She found the highway that the Charmbridge bus followed away from Chicago and the lake and into the rolling woodlands dotted with more towns and highways. Fatigued, frozen, and still in an emotional fugue, she was relieved when she finally reached the river valley separating the Muggle highway from the woods around Charmbridge. She went shooting over it, right past the Invisible Bridge, and descended over the trees to land on the doorstep of Charmbridge Academy.

There were a few students who stayed here even over winter break. Thus, she wasn't surprised when the front doors opened for her. It was still early morning, and she didn't see anyone as she marched down the main corridor dragging her broom behind her. The corridor was fully lit, and it was warm inside, so her nose began running after the hours in the freezing cold. By the time she reached the administrative wing, she was still angry and indignant, but she was also shivering, wet-faced, and so tired that her knees were shaking.

"Miss Quick," said Miss Marmsley. "Dean Grimm told me to expect you. Wait a moment and I'll -"

"*Pictogel*," Alexandra said, twirling her wand at the portrait. Miss Marmsley's mouth still moved, but it was as if she were trying to chew through a mouthful of rubber. Alexandra marched down the hall and threw open the door to the Dean's office.

Dean Grimm was sitting behind her desk. Before Alexandra could say a word, the Dean flicked her wand, and Alexandra's wand flew out of her hand. Ms. Grimm neatly snatched it out of the air. Two more flicks of her wand caused Alexandra's broom to slam into the ground, followed by her backpack. Then she pointed her wand at Alexandra. "Sit."

Alexandra fell into the nearest chair before she could think. She tried to speak, but her lips were sealed together and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Ms. Grimm made a minute gesture, and the chair Alexandra was sitting in, back against the far wall, came sliding across the carpet until it jerked to a halt directly opposite the Dean's desk, with Alexandra held to it as immobile and silent as if she'd been bound and gagged.

"Dean Grimm," came Miss Marmsley's voice from the small picture frame on the Dean's desk, sounding a little garbled. "I would have warned you Miss Quick was on her way in, but she tried to Freeze-Frame me!"

"Indeed." Ms. Grimm's expression didn't change, but her voice was wintry. "Well, she's here now. Thank you, Heather. Will you please see to it that Miss Quick's parents know that she has arrived safely and that I will be in touch shortly?"

"Yes, Dean Grimm."

The Dean held the ends of her wand pinched between her fingers, with her elbows on her desk. She and Alexandra stared at each other for a moment. Alexandra shifted a little to test the magic that held her to the chair. She couldn't even lift an arm.

"Let us be very clear, here, Miss Quick," said the Dean. "I will tolerate no outbursts, disrespect, or insolence. When I remove the Tongue-Tied Jinx I've put on you and unglue you from that chair, you will maintain your civility and your self-control and you will not raise your voice. We will have an adult conversation. You will not scream or carry on like a child. This is the moment you decide whether you're a witch or an uncontrollable little brat who doesn't deserve all the special consideration you've been given. Do you understand me?"

Alexandra's eyes burned with fury, but she nodded.

Ms. Grimm slashed the air. Alexandra could speak and move freely again. She didn't say anything; she was breathing too hard. The fireplace in the wall behind and to the left of the Dean's desk was ablaze, and Galen was lying stretched across the hearth with one eye open, regarding Alexandra.

"What you did was very foolish," Ms. Grimm said.

Alexandra remained silent.

"Claudia is very worried."

Alexandra didn't reply, except with a quick snort, followed by a snuffle.

Ms. Grimm set her wand down and steepled her fingers. "You're upset. That's understandable. I know you think you've been treated very unfairly, but there were reasons things were kept from you, Miss Quick."

"Miss Quick," Alexandra repeated.

The Dean raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Never mind. It's okay. I don't call Abraham Thorn 'Dad' and I'm certainly not going to call you 'Mom.' So I guess 'Miss Quick' is fine."

Lilith Grimm opened her mouth and to Alexandra's surprise, looked startled. "Wait - did Claudia tell you *I'm* your mother?"

Alexandra sat up straighter. "I -" She tried to remember Claudia's exact words. Her anger fizzled into confusion. "She said my mother is alive, at Charmbridge." She shook her head. Too many sudden shocks, compounded with an awful lot of fatigue and cold over the last twenty-four hours, were making her head swim. "You aren't?"

"No." Ms. Grimm sighed. "Perhaps Claudia believes I am. I've never actually asked what Abraham Thorn told her, and Claudia and I have only ever spoken directly to one another twice. The first time was on the day I came to your home to invite you to Charmbridge Academy. The second was today." Her steel gray eyes fixed on Alexandra's. "I'm not your mother, Alexandra, I'm your aunt."

Alexandra's mouth opened, and she almost rose from her seat. "Diana Grimm is my mother?" she exclaimed in horror.

Ms. Grimm shook her head again. "No. Diana is also your aunt."

Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut. "Please," she muttered, "stop playing games with me."

"I'm not playing games with you, Alexandra." Ms. Grimm's voice was gentle now, so Alexandra opened her eyes again. "It's a complicated story."

Alexandra bit back her first retort, and said, "I'm listening."

Lilith Grimm settled back in her chair, as if she had been waiting to tell this story for a long time. All the past deans in the portraits on the wall behind her watched as a silent, respectful audience, their usual slight restive motions stilled, the occasional whisper of their voices quieted.

"Your mother," Ms. Grimm said, "is our sister Hecate. Our 'little sister' as we always called her, though we were all born in the same hour. Hecate was the third of three, and we never let her forget it.

"Last out of the womb, first into every form of trouble and mayhem. Hecate was always outgoing, adventurous, rebellious. She was punished more than Diana and I put together - in fact, Diana and I almost never got in trouble. Hecate got in enough trouble for both of us." There was a hint of amusement in Lilith Grimm's gray eyes... and something else, too. She spoke of her sister with real affection.

"Diana - the first-born, and she never let us forget that - was the bossy, judgmental one. Never willing to let go a slight, always correcting wrongs, especially ours. Oh, how Hecate and Diana fought! I was the quiet, studious one who remembered everything and said little. I tried to be peacemaker, and after getting hexed for my troubles once too often, I stayed out of their way." Ms. Grimm shook her head. "We stopped being as close after that. Perhaps if I had been less studious and taken more interest in Hecate's personal life, or if Diana had tried to meddle in it less, Hecate might have continued to confide in us. But we grew apart, all three of us. We went to different schools. Diana became an Auror, I became a scholar, and Hecate..." She sighed.

"Hecate was always popular with boys." Ms. Grimm smiled thinly. "Diana and I found the attention from young men fascinating with the 'Grimm triplets' unflattering, but Hecate reveled in it. She was a free spirit, but she could also be a heartless, manipulative one. She left broken hearts a plenty in her wake, but I don't think she ever truly fell in love herself until she met Abraham Thorn.

"I don't know exactly when or how it happened - as I said, by then we weren't close and we weren't in regular communication - only that when everything went to Hades, when the Thorn Circle were all branded Dark Wizards and Abraham Thorn an Enemy of the Confederation, and the Wizard Justice Department was hunting the continent for him and his associates, it was Hecate who stood by his side, his most ardent devotee. Even though she was pregnant, she joined him as a fugitive... with her own sister one of the Inquisitors hunting her and her lover down."

Ms. Grimm seemed to be seeing someone else when she looked at Alexandra. Alexandra supposed she was. "They were on the run, the Inquisitors and Aurors were only a step behind them, most of the Thorn Circle were in hiding, imprisoned, or dead. Merlin knows under what circumstances Hecate gave birth. And of course, I was being watched continuously. So were all of Abraham Thorn's ex-wives and children in the wizarding world. I suppose that's why he brought you to your eldest sister, the one who'd been living in the Muggle world for years."

Alexandra's voice was hushed. "Because... they didn't want to take a baby with them while they were on the run?"

"No, Alexandra. I know my sister - Hecate had many qualities, good and bad. She was fiercely passionate, fiercely loyal, and fiercely stubborn. She'd never have abandoned you."

Alexandra swallowed. "She was killed? But Claudia said..."

"No. Hecate wasn't killed."

The Dean rose from her large leather chair behind her desk. She walked to the fireplace and picked up Galen, who meowed but did not resist being lifted away from the warm hearth. Ms. Grimm pulled another chair over to set it next to Alexandra, and set Galen on it.

"Hecate became Galenthias," said Ms. Grimm.

Alexandra stared at the black cat, who stared back at her and meowed.

"My mother... is a cat?" Alexandra thought that the world had become one very bad joke.

"Your mother was an Animorphmagus. Hecate may not have been as studious as me, but she was at least as clever and twice as talented. And when the Aurors and the Inquisitors caught up to her and your father - well, perhaps Diana will give you her version of what happened, if you ask her. Perhaps. I know that Abraham claims she was struck by a spell from one of the WJD agents. Diana claims it was *he* who Obliviated her."

"Obliviated?" Alexandra couldn't stop staring at the cat. Galenthias flicked her tail and continued studying Alexandra with unnerving attention, but nothing Alexandra could read as recognition.

"She lost the ability to transform out of her Animorphmagus state. She lost... *all* of her memories."

Alexandra tore her eyes away from the cat and stared at the witch. "Can't you restore them? Can't you turn her back into a human being? You just *left her as a cat*?"

Rather than become upset at Alexandra's tone, Ms. Grimm laid a hand on her shoulder, gently.

"Yes, Alexandra, I can turn her back into a human being. But restore her memories? No. Believe me, we tried. The greatest Healers in the Confederation tried. The Wizard Justice Department certainly tried." She reached across her desk and picked up her wand. "You won't really believe me unless I show you. I suppose you need to see this. It will not be easy."

It was only as Ms. Grimm waved her wand over the cat, whom Alexandra had always believed to be her familiar, that Alexandra realized that she didn't mean it wouldn't be easy for Alexandra. Lilith Grimm looked pained as she pronounced a few words and performed a complicated series of gestures.

Galenthias rose from her chair, elongated, grew, and in only a few seconds, transformed into a grown woman wearing a simple white gown.

She looked exactly like Lilith and Diana Grimm, except for the pleasant, blank expression on her face.

"Oh," she said, looking at Alexandra, "hello there."

Alexandra stared at her wordlessly.

Hecate Grimm looked up at Lilith. "Hello." Her face finally registered some emotion, as her forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "Do I know you?"

"I'm your sister, Lilith," said the Dean. "Hello, Hecate."

"Hecate? Is that my name?"

"Yes." Lilith laid a hand on Alexandra's shoulder. "This is your daughter."

Hecate tilted her head as she studied Alexandra. Her eyes were gray, just like her sisters', but there was an openness to them that Alexandra had never seen in the Dean or the Special Inquisitor. "My daughter? Are you sure? I don't remember having a daughter."

"Her name is Alexandra," said Lilith softly.

Hecate reached a hand out and touched Alexandra's cheek. Alexandra didn't move.

"You're a very pretty child," Hecate said.

"Thank you," Alexandra said, in a voice that was a rasp.

"What's your name?" Hecate asked.

Alexandra blinked.

"Her name is Alexandra," said Lilith.

Hecate frowned at Lilith. "And who are you?"

Lilith took her hand off of Alexandra's shoulder and moved to stand behind Hecate, putting both hands on her shoulders instead. "She hasn't just lost her memories," Lilith said, "but her *capacity to remember*. The Memory Charm that robbed her of her memories was an extraordinarily powerful one - perhaps miscast, perhaps just the most terrible synchronicity. She can't hold a single memory in her head. She can still speak - her power of language was not destroyed - but everything else is gone, and nothing can bring it back. Whatever you tell her will be forgotten in seconds."

"Excuse me, I'm sitting right here," Hecate said. "You're talking about me as if I weren't."

Lilith stroked her sister's long, black hair. "Tell her who you are a hundred times, Alexandra, and she'll still ask you your name a moment later. She can't even remember her own name."

"That's ridiculous -" Hecate frowned, and in a worried voice asked, "What is my name?"

"Hecate." Lilith's long, slender fingers settled onto her sister's shoulders again.

"And who are you?" Hecate asked. Guilelessly, she turned to Alexandra. "And this girl? What's your name, child?"

Alexandra sat still, in mute horror.

"Have you seen enough?" Lilith asked softly.

"What's wrong, young witch?" asked Hecate. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Alexandra said, "There has to be..."

"There isn't." Lilith abruptly tapped Hecate's head with her wand, and the woman disappeared, becoming a cat again. Lilith turned away.

Alexandra stared at the cat - her mother - Galenthias - who began licking one paw.

"So you just leave her as a *cat* for the rest of her life?" Alexandra asked, in a voice filled with disgust. "Letting her walk around the school like a *pet*, chasing mice and -"

Lilith Grimm whirled; her expression was hard and her voice was like a knife. "She can't take care of herself as a human, Alexandra! She can talk, she can eat, she can sleep, she can just barely dress and undress herself. Beyond that, she is as helpless as a kitten. What should I have done with her, put her in a home for the incurably cursed, where she can sit on a bed staring blankly at a wall, surrounded by gibbering lunatics and walking corpses? She's far happier and more independent as a cat than she'll ever be as a human, and here I can watch her and guard her and take care of her."

But, when you're a grown witch and have a home of your own, perhaps we can discuss alternate arrangements if you'd like to take on that responsibility."

Ms. Grimm's face softened when she saw Alexandra's expression. Alexandra was not so much hurt, as her aunt may have assumed, but reminded that growing up to take care of her mother herself might not even be an option.

She was also trembling visibly, suffering from shock and bone-wearying fatigue.

Ms. Grimm picked up the cat and set it on her lap as she sat down next to Alexandra.

"We've watched over you since you were born, but we respected Claudia's demand for autonomy and privacy. She knew that you would have to learn about the wizarding world someday, but she wanted nothing to do with it herself. She's been badly hurt. Don't judge her too harshly, Alexandra."

"I don't. I judge you. And my father. And Diana Grimm. Maybe Claudia had a reason for hiding from the wizarding world, but once I was here, you could have told me the truth any time." Alexandra's voice became thick. She welcomed the anger that diluted other emotions. "Were you laughing at me, all those times you stood there holding *my mother* in your arms?"

"Laughing at you? Of course I wasn't."

"Liar. You're all liars. You've lied to me from the beginning. All I've ever heard is lies! Lies my mother told me, lies you told me - every time I try to get the real story, I get another bunch of lies. You're probably lying to me again now!"

Ms. Grimm slapped her across the face.

"Your *mother* never lied to you," she said.

Galen made a startled sound and clawed at Lilith, who let her go, while Alexandra turned her head and put a hand to her mouth. The cat jumped out of the witch's lap, took a few steps across the carpet, and turned to regard both of them warily, tail flicking in agitation.

"You are not the only one who was done wrong here," Lilith Grimm said, in a voice that was soft but with none of its previous gentleness. "You are not the only one who has suffered. You are not the only one who has had a *difficult time*."

Then she was silent, while Alexandra kept her hand over her mouth.

"School starts Monday," the Dean said. "You would have been brought here tomorrow. I'll need to discuss with Claudia whether to keep you here or send you back home."

"I think I have a say in that."

"Actually, you don't. But I do think the two of you need to talk some more."

"Talk about what? Obviously there's no need for me to go back to Larkin Mills. Claudia doesn't want me there. Now she can leave the wizarding world behind completely." Alexandra dropped her hand from her face. "Maybe the Kings will let me stay with them summers from now on. If not..." Her voice trailed off.

"Self-pity doesn't become you, Alexandra."

"I'm not going home."

"You're not being rational. You're very emotional right now. You've suffered a series of shocks, and you're exhausted."

"Don't forget being cursed and smacked around. And I'm not being emotional!"

Ms. Grimm stood up. "Go see Mrs. Murphy. You need some Pepperup Potion or you're going to catch a deathly cold. Then get some sleep. We'll talk this evening or tomorrow morning. I have always acted in your best interests, Alexandra."

"Yeah, I can feel that." Alexandra rubbed her face.

"Really, child." The Dean was severe and aloof again. "You'd have gotten a lot more cursing and smacking around if I weren't so partial to you. That's my own weakness. On your way out, you will apologize to Miss Marmsley, and I mean a real apology, not something mumbled through your teeth. And if you ever throw a

Freeze-Frame spell or any other curse at her again, you'll find out what I do to students I'm not giving preferential treatment to."

Alexandra stood up, turbulent thoughts and emotions roiling in her head.

Ms. Grimm held out a hand, and without speaking a word, Alexandra's broom levitated off the floor and into her hand. "This will stay locked up now. You will not be taking it back to Larkin Mills with you." When Alexandra opened her mouth, Ms. Grimm said, "This would be a good time to consider your words carefully, dear. When in doubt, say nothing."

Alexandra closed her mouth. She left the Dean's office and shuffled to a halt in front of Miss Marmsley's portrait.

"I'm sorry I tried to Freeze-Frame you," she said. "I was... really upset."

"That's no excuse," Miss Marmsley said. And after a pause: "But I accept your apology."

Alexandra knew she did need rest. She obeyed the Dean's orders, and found Mrs. Murphy doing paperwork in her office. The nurse was surprised to see someone in the infirmary with the school almost empty, but she mixed a batch of Pepperup Potion for Alexandra and assured her she'd feel better in the morning.

On her way back to her room, trailing steam from her ears, Alexandra passed a squad of Clockworks mopping the floors. Leaning against the wall, twirling her wand and looking bored, was the sixth grader with dreadlocks who'd been outside the Dean's office the last time. She stopped twirling her wand when she saw Alexandra.

"Hey," she said, "you're back early."

"Yes." Alexandra didn't feel like talking to the girl.

"Hey, are you really a Dark Wizard's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Cool! Did Dean Grimm really turn you into a rat when you were in sixth grade?"

"Yes."

"Damn. You must have done something a lot worse than me."

Alexandra proceeded upstairs without giving the girl a chance to press for more. The warlock over Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall looked surprised to see her, too. She mumbled a greeting, reached her room, which was empty but for the blankets and sheets neatly folded at the foot of her bed and Anna's, awaiting their return. She stripped off her cloak, coat, and boots, pulled the blankets roughly around herself, and collapsed onto the bed, still steaming from the Pepperup Potion.

She didn't actually hear anything, or didn't remember hearing anything, but when she opened her eyes, it was with the definite feeling that there had been a sound in her room, and that was why she'd woken up.

She was lying on her side with her face to the wall. She rolled over onto her other side. She had slept all day; the sunlight coming in through the window was weak and fading. Her ears felt hot and her nose was a little runny, but she was no longer cold and shivering.

She saw the top of a bald, wrinkled head, and sat up. "Quimley!"

The elf stood in the middle of the room, arms hanging loosely in his oversized denim jacket, the baggy cuffs of his pants draped around his feet, almost covering his shoes. Even elves didn't go barefoot in the winter.

"I'm so happy to see you!" Alexandra threw her blankets off and rolled her shoulders, which were still stiff from hours spent hunched over a broom.

"Quimley thought Alexandra Quick would still be at her house," the elf said.

Alexandra winced. "Oh, no. You went looking for me there?"

"Do not worry. Muggles did not see Quimley."

Alexandra slid off her bed to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of Quimley. "I was worried about you. You've been gone so long, I thought something might have happened to you."

There was a ghost of a smile on the elf's pale lips. "Quimley is very good at not being seen and not being found. But Quimley found John Manuelito."

"You did?" Alexandra sucked in a breath. "Where is he?"

"What will Alexandra Quick do?"

She frowned. "I guess that depends on where he is. Is he around here? Or -" A horrible thought occurred to her. "Is he near Larkin Mills?"

"No. John Manuelito has joined some very bad wizards in a place far from here. Quimley thinks Alexandra Quick is better staying away from John Manuelito. Let wizards deal with wizards."

"I'm a witch."

"Alexandra Quick is a very young witch. And these are very bad wizards."

"Where is he, Quimley?"

The elf sighed. "John Manuelito is in the Indian Territories."

"The Indian Territories?" That was a huge area on the map of the Confederation. There were actually many 'Indian Territories' scattered around the continent, but most people, when referring to the Indian Territories, meant the large region in the southwest. "Where in the Indian Territories?"

"Wizards call it Din^otah," Quimley said.

"That's a long way from here."

"Yes, it is a long way from here."

"Do you know how long he's been there?"

"Quimley thinks he has been there for months."

"What's he doing there?"

Quimley shivered. "Indian wizards have no house-elves, and such magical beings as live in Din~~o~~tah are not the sort who are friendly to elves. Quimley only saw John Manuelito a few times, in his log house which is far from anywhere other humans, wizard or Muggle, live. Quimley saw other wizards visit him, wizards who turned into animals. They scared Quimley. But worst of all was when Quimley waited until John Manuelito left his house, and then snuck inside to look."

"Quimley!" Alexandra was horrified - and curious. "I didn't ask you to spy on him! I didn't want you to endanger yourself!"

"No, Alexandra Quick did not want Quimley to endanger himself, but she wanted to know about John Manuelito. She did not ask Quimley to spy, because she did not have to."

Alexandra swallowed, unable to deny the charge and unable to admit even to herself that it was true.

"Quimley also wanted to know about this wizard Alexandra Quick thinks is her enemy," the elf said, as if to assuage her conscience. Then he shuddered. "There were... skins and entrails in John Manuelito's house." His eyes were so wide that Alexandra could see her own face reflected in them. "Quimley does not think they were all from animals." The elf looked down. "Quimley is sorry - he did not stay to look more closely."

"It's all right. I'm glad you got out of there." Alexandra looked out the window. The sun was almost down. "Quimley...what kind of animals?"

"Sorry?"

"The wizards who visited John Manuelito. What kind of animals did they turn into?"

"Quimley saw coyotes, owls, a raven, and a fox. Perhaps others."

Owls. Alexandra's thoughts filled with bilious rage and a torrent of unspoken obscenities. Quimley shrank away from what he saw in her eyes.

She took several slow, deep breaths. "Can you show me on a map exactly where he's located? His house, I mean."

Quimley wrung his hands. "Surely you will not go there?"

"Maybe I want to tell my father. Or the Wizard Justice Department."

"Maybe' does not sound like you want to do that."

"Quimley, you found him like I asked - are you really not going to show me?"

The elf's lower lip turned up and he regarded her with wide, woeful eyes. "Quimley is afraid Alexandra Quick will do something terrible and foolish."

"I just -" She took another deep breath, and forced herself to speak very calmly. "I just want to know where he is. It's not like I could actually go all the way to Din^otah. Dean Grimm took my broom away. I can't Apparate. I can't even drive. Will *you* take me there?"

Quimley shook his head vigorously. "No."

"Someday, maybe I will go looking for him. Or maybe I'll just settle for letting someone else do that. But he's been stalking me here, and in Larkin Mills, and I just want to know where he is. I want to have some way of knowing where to find him. Maybe I'll find a curse in the library I can cast at him by knowing where he lives. I'm sick of being helpless and sitting around waiting for someone else to come after me because they always know where to find me. I asked you to do this for me, Quimley. Are you going to tell me now that you won't, after you spent weeks finding him in the first place?"

Quimley's one good ear drooped. With a heavy sigh, he reached into the pocket of his denim jacket and withdrew a crumpled, folded map. It wasn't on parchment or vellum. It was paper, and when Quimley unfolded it, Alexandra saw that it was labeled: 'USGS Topographic Map of the Four Corners Region (including the Navajo Nation and Joint Use Territories).'

Quimley opened it to a vast, empty quadrangle that looked like it was about fifty miles from anywhere, and further than that from the nearest city. Quimley put a shaking finger on a smudged black circle. "Here is John Manuelito's log house."

"Right in the middle of nowhere." Alexandra sat looking at the map for a long time, while it continued to grow dark outside.

"Quimley must return now," said the elf.

"You mean to the Lands Below?"

Quimley nodded.

Alexandra took one of his small hands in hers. "Are you sure you won't consider staying up here? Not all wizards are cruel."

"No, Alexandra Quick, not all wizards are cruel. But Quimley belongs with the Generous Ones."

"I don't understand that."

Quimley nodded sadly. "Alexandra Quick does not have to understand."

Alexandra put her arms around the elf and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Quimley. I know I've put you through so much. If you ever do want anything from me, I owe you. I really do."

Even in the dark, she could see Quimley turning pink. "No, Alexandra Quick. Quimley will not accept any debt from Abraham Thorn's daughter."

"Do you really have to go?"

"Yes. But Quimley hopes he will see Abraham Thorn's daughter again."

"I hope so, too."

"Good-bye, Alexandra Quick. Please do not do anything foolish or dangerous." The elf disappeared with a pop.

Alexandra went down to dinner, taking her pack with her. There were less than a dozen other students, none in her grade. A few sat together despite their age differences. About half sat alone, like her. From across the cafeteria, the sixth grade troublemaker waved her

hand. Alexandra gave a perfunctory wave back, keeping her posture and her expression uninviting. It worked; the girl did not come over.

Alexandra had generous portions of everything, stuffing herself. Then she went back for seconds, then thirds, and each time she returned to her table, she wrapped the food and put it into her backpack. She even went back a fourth time to pick up some more bread and fruit.

On her way back to her room, the warlock hanging over the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall said, "You aren't sneaking food into your room, are you?"

"No." She unslung her pack and held it defiantly open for him, knowing the portrait could not see into the depths of the magical pack. "See?"

"I didn't ask to see," he said with a harrumph. "Miss Marmsley told me to let you know that you're to report to the Dean's office tomorrow morning, immediately after breakfast."

"Fine. Whatever."

She proceeded to her room and placed her backpack on her desk. She reached inside, rummaging around all the things she had stored in it while she was back in Larkin Mills. There were a few books, a first aid kit, the Seven-League Boots, and all of her Christmas presents. These she left in the pack, except for the magic mirror from Julia. She also took out her Skyhook, and her Lost Traveler's Compass. She laid these on her desk, along with a quill and a long piece of parchment.

She had several changes of clothing which she hadn't taken home still in her dresser. She put these in her pack.

Tomorrow was Sunday, and everyone who had gone home over vacation would be returning to Charmbridge, including Anna. Alexandra spent the rest of the evening writing a long letter to her friend, relating everything that had happened - and where she was going. Alexandra wouldn't be reporting to the Dean's office the next morning. She would be gone long before then.

Runaway

When the alarm woke her, hours before dawn, Alexandra slapped it immediately and got out of bed. Rubbing her eyes, she expected to hear Charlie greet her, then remembered that Charlie was still back in Larkin Mills.

A wave of sadness swept over her, and for a moment she reconsidered her plan. She missed Charlie, and she even missed Nigel. Her friends would think she was insane, and she didn't know if Bonnie was going to recover. Wasn't she being reckless and foolish to run away like this?

She forced herself to remember why Bonnie was in a hospital bed. John Manuelito would keep coming after Alexandra until she was dead - or one of her friends was. She had to find him and stop him.

She was still working out what, exactly, she was going to do when she found him, but it felt good to be angry and righteous and vengeful. Running away to confront a shadowy nemesis who was responsible for every bad thing that had happened to her in the past year felt better than confronting lying adults and so-called 'parents.'

Her father had already been formidable at fourteen. Absalom Thorn had said as much. Would Abraham Thorn have just sat in his room and waited for the WJD to take care of a Dark Wizard threatening him and his loved ones? Alexandra was sure that he would not. She'd prove herself, and then dare Abraham and Absalom Thorn not to take her seriously.

She sat in front of the magic mirror she'd left on her desk the night before. Her reflection smiled a pretty girl's smile at her. In the mirror, her unbrushed hair was straight and perfect, her bleary green eyes were sparkling, and every other blemish in her sleepy face was erased, showing her what she could look like if she applied the Glamour charms Julia had taught her. Alexandra tapped the mirror with her wand.

"Older," she said. "I want to look older."

Her reflection arched an eyebrow coyly, then became less childish and more mature. Not much older, and still her, but Alexandra knew what an incredible transformation makeup charms could achieve.

"Much older," she said, thinking that the girl in the mirror would still barely pass for sixteen.

Her mirror-self frowned a little at that, but obligingly tossed her head and adopted a much more serious countenance. Her eyes darkened and her skin tone grew less pale. Alexandra could imagine this girl passing for seventeen or eighteen - maybe.

She had learned Illusions and Disillusionment Charms the previous year, but Mr. Newton had kept the lessons mostly focused on inanimate objects. Faces moved and shifted too much and Disguise Charms didn't last long, so Alexandra hadn't practiced them much. Nor did she know how to brew Polyjuice Potion. She began casting makeup charms to match what the mirror showed her, while making a note to herself: a witch should learn magic before she'd need it.

As the sun began to illuminate the horizon, she went to the bathroom mirror, which showed only her actual face. The transformation was not quite as perfect as she had hoped. She looked rather like an inexperienced teenager trying to look older. She sighed. Julia was much better at this.

"Now dear, you look fine," said the bathroom mirror. "Although that's rather a lot of makeup, don't you think? Oh, please don't get angry!" The mirror had not forgotten being broken when Alexandra was in sixth grade.

"I'm not. Do you think I look... older?"

"Oh, my. There's a boy, isn't there?"

Alexandra walked out of the bathroom without answering and put her own mirror back in the backpack. She studied the map Quimley had given her, and attuned her Lost Traveler's Compass to the point where John Manuelito's log cabin was located before putting the map back in her pack and the Compass in her pocket. She tucked the letter she had written to Anna under her roommate's bare pillow.

Finally, she ate some bread and fruit. Then she put on her sweater, her coat, and her charmed mud- and snow-repelling boots, and picked up the Skyhook, slinging her backpack over her other shoulder. She opened the window, swung out on the Skyhook, closed the window from outside, and descended to the ground.

There was some snow on the ground, but mostly the earth was just damp and muddy near the school as she hiked through the woods. It was almost too easy, she thought. But then, who ever ran away from Charmbridge?

After this, they'll probably put a Trace on me even at school. Assuming I ever come back to school. Dean Grimm really might expel her after this, even if she was her aunt. And Alexandra wasn't sure she wanted to come back to Charmbridge Academy anyway. To watch her mother walking around the hallways in the form of a cat?

She didn't know where the Trace actually started, but she cast the Transfiguration spell she had learned last year on her boots, turning them into snowshoes, before she left the boundaries of Charmbridge. The snow was heavier on the ground as she exited the woods and approached the valley.

The snowshoes were only a little awkward while she crossed the Invisible Bridge. As soon as she reached the other side, the snow felt firm and her feet light, and she was able to move at a brisk walk.

The two-lane highway didn't get a lot of traffic even during the summer. Alexandra didn't know exactly where it went in the direction away from Chicago, but she had rarely seen other vehicles on it. Now the road was icy and treacherous and didn't appear to have been salted or plowed recently. Few non-magical vehicles would dare attempt the ascent from either direction, and no one passed her during her hike down the mountain.

It took over an hour, and Alexandra worked up a light sweat. The sun was above the horizon when she reached the highway signs pointing to Chicago. Once she came to the highway, there was traffic on the road, even this early.

Archie had told Alexandra all about the dangers of hitchhiking, of course, when she was far too young to ever consider doing such a thing. She hadn't been too young for her stepfather to fill her head with dire warnings about rape, dismemberment, and being sold to a white slavery ring that would ship her off to a foreign country. With her wand safely at hand, Alexandra felt quite capable of protecting herself, but she was glad when the people who picked her up were a friendly middle-aged couple. She told her story of being a college freshman who'd just had a fight with her boyfriend and was trying to

get back to Chicago. Mrs. Stuckley clucked sympathetically, while commenting that she looked so young. Alexandra tried to act convincingly distraught and hoped they wouldn't ask her too many details about the university she'd named, which happened to be only a few blocks from the Goblin Market.

The Stuckleys drove her all the way to Chicago and dropped her off right in front of the university. She thanked them profusely, waited until they had disappeared around the corner, then walked in the opposite direction.

She was feeling very pleased with herself. The next step would be trickier. She was pretty sure the thirty-two dollars, four eagles, and ten pidges that was all the cash she had in the world would not get her to Din~~o~~tah. Which meant she needed to get into the Colonial Bank of the New World, withdraw some money, and then disappear into Muggle Chicago quickly. Any moment now, Dean Grimm would discover that she had run away. Alexandra didn't know what resources might be put on her trail: the Trace Office, for sure, but possibly her aunt as well.

She didn't go to Grobnowski's Old World Deli, but the strip mall laundromat that Ms. Grimm had once taken her to. She walked past the Muggles in the front of the laundromat, down the corridor to the back entrance, and ignoring the locks and signs saying 'No Exit,' opened the door and stepped out into the Goblin Market.

Even in January, it was busy, though not so busy as in September. There were New Year's decorations still up, and everyone from Ilsing's Wizard Wares to the Chicago Broom Megastore had put up signs advertising clearance sales. Alexandra had to resist the temptation to duck into Boxley's Books to spend an hour or two browsing unchaperoned, and possibly even test the Age Line that the magical portrait of Justice Boxley said was on the other side of the door to the 'Very Special Interests' section. But she didn't have time. Diana Grimm might even now be searching the streets for her.

Alexandra walked directly to the Colonial Bank of the New World, and down the street saw the same alley she'd almost followed Gertrude into the previous September. Sure enough, a large woman with a scarf around her head and her back to the bank was talking to a little wizard who looked around furtively before preceding her down the alley.

Alexandra took the bank book her father had given her out of her pack and entered the bank.

She walked confidently into the foyer, and stopped in her tracks when she found Mr. Dearborn looking down at her.

The father of Darla and Mary Dearborn was hanging from the wall in a life-sized portrait, wearing an elegant black velvet suit with white and purple ruffles. His expression was very severe and serious. 'James Constantine Dearborn II: Central Territory Director of the Colonial Bank of the New World' read the plaque beneath him.

His hair was grayer and his face more lined than Alexandra remembered from his visit to Charmbridge Academy after Darla's death. She let out a breath when she realized the portrait was not a living, seeing one. Mr. Dearborn, of course, was still alive. Perhaps this portrait would become alive when he died, but for now, it was just oil on canvas.

She continued into the bank lobby, and stopped dead in her tracks for a second time when she saw the real Mr. Dearborn.

The Central Territory Director of the Colonial Bank of the New World was standing in the middle of the lobby talking to some other wizards. They were wearing robes and cloaks, but Mr. Dearborn wore a suit much like that in his portrait, and the same serious expression.

There was no way Alexandra could walk past him and expect not to be seen. It was possible he might remain in conversation with the other patrons and ignore her, but all it would take was one glance in her direction. Alexandra's makeup charms might make her look older, but they weren't true illusions, and she was certain that Mr. Dearborn would remember her face. How could he not recognize the girl who was responsible for his daughter's death?

She stood there in the entrance for a minute, her gaze sweeping the lobby, hoping to see a side entrance or some other way to walk around to the counters without going through the lobby. There were none. The longer she stood there, the greater the chance that Mr. Dearborn might notice her. She backed into the foyer and waited nervously beneath his portrait, listening to him continue talking to the wizards. Eventually they ended their conversation, but then the banker greeted a new customer who'd just walked in. Alexandra

stifled a groan. Apparently the Director of all the CBNW branches in Central Territory had chosen *today* to personally greet all the customers at *this* one. How long would he stand there in the lobby? And how long could she remain here without someone wondering why a teenage girl was loitering by the bank entrance?

Gritting her teeth, she slipped outside. Maybe she'd try again in ten minutes. She couldn't wait much longer if she wanted to get out of Chicago this morning.

Across the street, she saw a girl walking toward her and cursed under her breath. It was Mary Dearborn. She was carrying a small paper bag with the Goody Pruett logo on it.

"What is this, Take Your Daughter to Work Day?" Alexandra muttered.

She looked down the street in the opposite direction, and saw the hulking shadow of someone lurking just at the mouth of the alley where the woman and the furtive little wizard had disappeared earlier.

This wasn't the plan, she thought. But Mary was going to ascend the steps to the bank any moment, and Alexandra had no idea how long father and daughter would be inside.

She hurried down the steps, keeping her back to Mary as she rounded the corner of the bank to put it between them, then rushed down the street. She didn't dare look back, and was so determined to get away that she got yelled at by a man in black robes riding an immense black horse when she stepped in front of him while crossing the street.

"Sorry," she said, hurrying on. The man in the cloak cursed at her, and the horse snorted flames out of its nostrils.

She slowed her pace and approached the figure in the alleyway calmly. It was a hag, squatting in front of a little kettle that hung from a tripod and boiled as if there were a fire beneath it, though there was nothing but brick pavement.

The hag said, "You look familiar, dearie."

"I think we've met," Alexandra said.

"Have we?"

"Are you Gertrude?"

The hag inspected her nails. They were shorter than Martha's, but just as black. "Am I?"

"Or Hilda?"

"We do all look alike, don't we?"

Alexandra felt the reproach, but pressed on. "I need to borrow some money."

The hag did a double-take, then burst into dry, cackling laughter. "Excuse me? Dear child, I've heard some fantastic witch's tales about hags, but this is a new one! Whoever told you that hags hand out money to greedy little girls?"

"I'm not a little girl, and I don't expect you to hand out money. But I'll bet you deal in pawned goods and loans, just like you trade in..." Alexandra lowered her voice. "Things you can't buy in stores."

The hag leaned forward, until Alexandra could smell her breath. It was disturbingly sweet and apple-scented. "What do you want, dear... something better than the Glamour Charms you've used to age yourself? I might be able to help. Now, if you're trying to get past an Age Line, it will take much more than a Glamour Charm..."

Alexandra filed that away, and said, "No, I need money. I actually have an account at the CBNW but I can't go in there right now. But I can pay you back the next time I'm in Chicago..." Her voice trailed off. She could tell from the hag's expression that she sounded pitiful. She pulled out her bank book. "I can prove I really do have an account."

"Then why don't you just walk across the street and get this money you need so desperately?"

"I don't have time."

"Ah." The hag laid a finger against the corner of her mouth and smiled slyly. "And why should I give you money?"

"I assume you charge interest, right?"

"Oh, the young witch understands banking!" The hag chuckled. "Well then, you understand that what you're asking for is -" she drew herself upright and spoke very slowly, as if to a child " - what we in the *financial services industry* refer to as an 'unsecured loan.'" She grinned at Alexandra's sullen expression. "Now, normally, I'd require some guarantee of repayment."

"Like what?"

"Oh, an Unbreakable Vow usually suffices."

Alexandra gulped. "An Unbreakable Vow?"

"I'd need to enlist one of my wanded colleagues to cast the spell, and it all becomes rather complicated and expensive." Alexandra sensed that the hag was merely toying with her. "Just how much do you want, dearie?"

"Ten lions."

"Ten lions? My, that's an awful lot of lunch money."

Alexandra glowered. "I'm serious."

"Not for ten lions, you're not. Hardly even worth getting a wizard to cast an Unbreakable Vow for that amount." The hag reached a hand out to touch Alexandra under the chin. "Though if you need the money that badly, there are ways -"

Alexandra backed away. "Look, I can swear on my witch's honor -"

The hag cackled laughter so loudly that witches and wizards passing on the street turned their heads. "Oh, *your witch's honor*? Well, why didn't you say so? In that case, I'll hand it right over!"

"Stop making fun of me."

The hag stopped laughing. "Do you know what *collateral* is?"

"Yes." Alexandra frowned, thinking about the contents of her pack.

"I can offer you a good deal on your wand - much more than ten lions."

"Forget it." Alexandra could only think of one object she possessed that might be valuable and that she could do without. She opened the top of her pack and reached inside.

The hag watched as Alexandra's arm went all the way in. "A magical backpack? I can give you a few lions for that, depending on how large -"

"I'm keeping the pack." Alexandra almost winced as she pulled out the magic mirror. *I'm sorry, Julia.* She offered it to the hag.

The hag took it in both hands and held it up to her face. She brought one hand to her cheek. "Why, bless my soul! Aren't you the most flattering glass I've ever seen." She lowered it. "It's not worth ten lions."

"It totally is!" Alexandra said angrily. "It's a gift from my sister! Anyway, I'm not selling it - I'm offering it as collateral."

The hag sighed. "Morrigan and Scathach, I'm becoming soft-hearted in my old age. All right, young witch. I'll give you seven lions, and if you want the mirror back, before the next new moon, you bring me thirteen."

"That's almost a hundred percent interest!"

"Such a clever child," the hag said in a kindly voice.

"Nine lions."

"Eight lions, and your interest will make it fifteen to get it back."

Alexandra clenched her teeth together. "Can you give it to me in dollars?"

"Oh, you want Muggle money? Well, there's an exchange fee, of course." The hag set the mirror next to her cauldron, pulled out a small purse from inside her robes, and unrolled several very green bills. She counted them out and handed them to Alexandra.

"This is way less than Gringotts or the CBNW would give me for eight lions," Alexandra said.

"Then go to Gringotts or the CBNW."

Alexandra glared at her and put the money in her backpack. "What's your name, so I can find you?"

"Gertrude." The hag laughed. "Until next time, dear."

Half an hour later, Alexandra was at the Greyhound bus terminal. She walked to the ticket counter, and said in her most confident, adult voice: "Farewell, New Mexico, please."

The woman behind the booth looked bored, but hesitated when Alexandra slid cash across the counter. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Alexandra said, speaking in her most bored, why-are-you-asking-me-this? voice. Inwardly, she was sweating.

"You got any ID?"

Alexandra looked at the placard on the counter, with rules and regulations in small print. "It doesn't say I need ID to buy a bus ticket. If I had a driver's license I wouldn't be taking a *bus*, would I?"

The clerk rolled her eyes. "Well, you don't need to cop an attitude, honey." She printed out the ticket and slid it and the meager change back across the counter. "Have a nice trip."

The bus did not actually board for another forty minutes. Alexandra sat on one of the benches in the bus station and unfolded the map of the Four Corners region again. It was a long way from Farewell, New Mexico to where Quimley had circled John Manuelito's hideout. She guessed she'd have to hitchhike - she couldn't just run down the highway in her Seven-League Boots.

And then? She still had the magical card Diana Grimm had given her that would summon her. Alexandra would track down John Manuelito and then let her aunt the Special Inquisitor come and get him.

There were several obvious holes in this plan that Alexandra could see even in her current state of mind, but she was still running on rage and indignation and above all, a desperate desire to get away from both Charmbridge Academy and Larkin Mills.

The bus driver opened the door and allowed passengers to board. Alexandra found a seat near the back and thought about trying to call Anna. But Anna was probably already on her way to Charmbridge Academy, and if Alexandra did reach her, Anna would only try to talk her out of this.

Alexandra leaned her head against the glass and watched the highway fly past. It was dull and gray and seemed much slower than the Automagicka. The trip to New Mexico would take over twenty-four hours, with food and rest stops along the way. Despite her resolution to keep her eyes open, she fell asleep, missing Charlie and wishing she had her raven here to watch over her.

She woke up when she felt the bus turn. She sat up and saw signs telling her they were entering St. Louis. The weather was clear; the sun was still up, but not for much longer.

She checked her phone messages while they rolled past the St. Louis Arch. She had half a dozen. The first three were from Claudia. She deleted them. The next was from Payton. He was wondering why she hadn't called on New Year's Day like she'd said she would. The fifth was from Anna, who was disappointed at not reaching her, as she wasn't sure when she'd get a chance to use her cell phone again.

The last was from Livia.

"Hello Alexandra," said her sister. "We still have some things to talk about. I don't want you calling me at home again or at my office. I'm going to give you my cell phone number. Call me tomorrow night at six o'clock."

That had been left the previous night, while Alexandra was still at Charmbridge. It was now close to six o'clock.

The bus pulled into a large, gray concrete terminal. Gateway Station was a major regional hub serving buses, trains, taxis, and rental cars. Signs promised a food court, as well as restrooms that had to be cleaner than the bus toilet. There would be a two-hour layover, so Alexandra disembarked.

The terminal was all steel and concrete and colored glass, much newer than Chicago's Union Station. Alexandra found the food court and bought a soda, which she carried to the most isolated corner of the station she could find to drink with food she took out of her backpack. Sitting on a plastic bench looking out a window onto a not particularly scenic view of downtown St. Louis, she dialed Livia's number.

The curt voice answered after one ring: "Hello."

"I thought you never wanted to hear from me again," Alexandra said.

If Livia was taken aback by Alexandra's own curtness, she answered smoothly enough. "That was before I saw Claudia."

"Well, you can stay in Milwaukee and never see either of us again. That's what you want, right?"

This time Livia didn't answer right away. "I don't know."

Alexandra sipped from her soda, and an announcement about a train leaving for Memphis echoed through the terminal.

"Where are you?" asked Livia.

Alexandra ignored the question. "What do you want, then?"

"What did you mean about what's inside the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse?"

"Does your family still own that building?" Alexandra asked. "You used to go there when you were a child, didn't you?"

"I think I might have visited Larkin Mills as a child. And I suppose the Pruett family does still own it."

"What is your family doing with it?"

"I'm the only Pruett left. What is this about, Alexandra?"

"You mean *you* own all the Goody Pruett's in the Confederation?"

"Not exactly. My grandparents' will was complicated. They established a trust which meant that I got most of the money from

the company but no control over it. Anyway, I left that behind too when I became Wandless."

"So you left your family and your family fortune behind. Just like you left your sister behind."

Now emotion colored Livia's voice. "I didn't leave Claudia, Alexandra. I had no say - I was *eight*! I begged my grandparents to let her live with us. You have no idea what it was like growing up with them."

Alexandra watched a bus pass by in front of her.

"So why are you interested in an abandoned warehouse?" Livia asked.

"It's being used by the Dark Convention."

"It's *what*?"

"You know, like on TV, where drug smugglers hide their drugs in a toy factory or something? Except instead of drug smugglers, it's hags, and instead of drugs, it's - whatever, Dark artifacts and stuff. I thought you might want to know that."

"How do you know this?"

"I guess it probably doesn't make any difference to you. But I'm thinking if the Wizard Justice Department finds out, they might come looking for you to ask questions. Have you heard of the WODAMND Act?"

"The what?"

"Ask Diana Grimm about it the next time you see her. Did you know she's my aunt?"

Livia was silent.

"Why did you never speak to Claudia again?" Alexandra asked. "Why did you never come to see either of us? Because Claudia was hiding from the wizarding world and made everyone promise to leave her alone? That's such a cop-out. It's almost as bad as when our father uses it. In fourteen years, none of you could have told her 'Your sister who you're pretending is your daughter has a right to know who we are'?"

"You make it sound very simple. There's more than what you've heard."

"No kidding? Are you going to tell me the rest?"

Livia hesitated. "I can't - it involves me, and Claudia, and our father, and probably no one of us knows everything, not even him."

"Well, why don't you all have a chat and then let me know when you decide what you're going to tell me. If anything. But you really should do something about that warehouse. Especially the portrait of Goody Pruett hanging there alone in the dark."

"What were you doing in there? You said there are *hags* living there?"

"Tell Claudia I'm all right if you talk to her," Alexandra said.

"Wait, where *are* you?"

"Bye." Alexandra hung up and finished her meal. When her phone rang, she turned it off.

Two hours later, she was on another bus. There were more empty seats than on the ride from Chicago to St. Louis. To her surprise, quite a few of the other passengers were young men and women, teenagers only a few years older than herself. She curled up and closed her eyes until the bus was underway again, to discourage anyone from talking to her.

Oklahoma was flat and featureless, and they crossed most of it at night. Alexandra woke up when new passengers boarded in Tulsa and an elderly woman with bad teeth sat next to her.

"Going to Amarillo, dear?" she asked, ignoring the resentful look Alexandra had unsuccessfully deployed to keep her away.

"No. New Mexico."

"Oh, that's quite a ways. I'm going to see my brother in Amarillo. He's retired. He has back problems." The woman - who never even gave her name to Alexandra, nor asked hers - proceeded to tell Alexandra all about her retired brother, their deceased parents, her

younger sister in Waco, the thirty-seven years she'd spent as a clerk in the Tulsa records office, drought, real estate prices, and 'peak oil.' Alexandra barely replied with more than a mumble at first, and then stopped replying altogether. The woman didn't notice, but she kept Alexandra awake for most of the next four hours before finally nodding off herself. When the woman got off in Amarillo, Alexandra was grateful, only to have someone else sit next to her. The bus was crowded now - apparently a lot of people took the Greyhound from Texas to New Mexico - and her seatmate this time was a large Hispanic man wearing a faded brown leather jacket. He smelled like sweat and hay and cow manure, and had large, scarred hands which he kept on his knees. He nodded to Alexandra once, smiled in an almost nervous manner, and didn't say a thing to her. By now it was almost noon. Alexandra thought about checking her phone messages, but she was so tired, she just napped some more.

Charlie was confined in the cage in her room back in Larkin Mills. The water dish was full, the food tray filled, and in his glass cage, Nigel basked contentedly on his warming rock. Charlie regarded the snake with a mixture of primal antipathy and disdain for its tiny reptile brain. But what Charlie felt most of all was resentment and frustration.

"Alexandra!" the raven cried. "Alexandra!"

"Sorry, Charlie," Alexandra whispered, and woke up. The man next to her grunted and blinked sleepily at her. She had been dreaming, and while dreaming, she had sensed her familiar's distress. Charlie wasn't going to forgive her quickly when they were reunited.

They reached Albuquerque in the afternoon, beneath cloudy skies, and Alexandra had to wait for another four-hour layover and bus change. She disembarked and ate another of the meals she'd packed Saturday night at Charmbridge. Buying a pizza at the station was tempting, but after Gertrude's gouging, Alexandra barely had enough money for a bus ticket home. It would be embarrassing to fail to catch John Manuelito and need to call someone to come pick her up.

She checked her phone. She had another message from Payton. She texted him an apology and a promise to call soon.

She thought about calling Anna or David, but they would be at Charmbridge now, already unpacked and eating dinner and

probably quite upset about what their crazy, reckless friend was doing. Then she remembered that she still didn't know what Bonnie's condition was. After some hesitation, she dialed Brian's home phone number.

After several rings, Mrs. Seabury answered: "Hello, Seabury residence." She sounded worn and subdued, but Alexandra thought it was a good sign that she was home and answering with her usual impeccable cordiality.

"Hello, Mrs. Seabury. It's Alexandra."

"Alexandra! Good lord, where are you? Your mother told us you've run away!"

Oops.

"I was wondering..." Alexandra licked her lips. "How is Bonnie?"

"She... she's in stable condition. The doctors said it's almost miraculous how well she's doing. She came out of her coma, but she's going to be in recovery for a long time."

"That's good." Alexandra wiped her eyes. "I'm really glad."

"Alexandra, where are you?"

"Can I speak to Brian, please?"

"Not unless you tell me where you are first. Do you know how worried your parents are?"

My real parents aren't worried about me at all, she thought bitterly. "I'm fine, Mrs. Seabury. But I'd really like to speak to Brian."

"Alexandra, I don't know what problems you're having, but running away isn't a solution. Why don't you come home, and then you can talk to Brian."

Alexandra bit back half a dozen angry retorts. With difficulty, she controlled her temper and said, "Tell Brian I'm fine, and that I'm really glad Bonnie is going to be all right. Will you tell him that, please?" When Mrs. Seabury didn't answer immediately, Alexandra hung up.

She leaned back against the wall behind her hard plastic chair in the bus terminal and closed her eyes. At least she'd accomplished one good thing.

Now, she had to catch the man responsible for Bonnie's condition. *Vengeance*. She amended the thought: *No, justice*.

The passengers heading westward boarded the bus, and Alexandra boarded with them. The bus driver barely glanced at her before nodding her on board. She found a seat in the back which she was able to keep for herself, and sat staring out the window, thinking about what she'd do once she reached her final stop. The bus left Albuquerque, but it was almost as bright as it had been beneath the city's lights, thanks to a waxing moon, almost full, shining over the northern New Mexico desert. Somewhere across that desert was a little round log house where John Manuelito was doing whatever sick things he was up to. Alexandra's fingers gripped her wand, inside the pocket of her jacket.

The bus pulled into Farewell, New Mexico at ten minutes before midnight. Alexandra was one of four people who got out. Farewell was a terminal stop. As the bus turned around and headed back toward Albuquerque, Alexandra surveyed the dark horizon, lit by stars illuminating the serrated mountains in the distance, and felt as if she were standing at the edge of the world. She knew this was nonsense - the highway continued on all the way to California. But with nothing but flat brush and desert and a few scattered towns between her and her destination, and more importantly, not a single friend within a thousand miles, not even Charlie, she felt utterly and completely alone.

Forlornly, she considered how she would get to Orange Rock, a small town right in the middle of the place that wizards called Din~~o~~tah and Muggles called the Navajo Nation. It was thirty miles from here and twenty miles from the Interstate. Her Glamour charms had worn off long ago: she looked fourteen again. She doubted a hotel would let an underage girl check in, even if she were willing to blow her money on a hotel room. She was starting to think maybe she should have planned ahead better.

Screw that, she thought. *Am I a witch or not?* She was long out of range of Central Territory's Trace Office, and if she couldn't even get

herself a place to sleep or cross a few miles of desert, what business did she have taking on a Dark Wizard? Would her father have been a gloomy runaway, beset with doubts because he wasn't sure where he was going to sleep that night? Someone who meant to be taken seriously didn't worry about such trivial details.

A middle-aged woman who was one of the disembarking passengers gave Alexandra a disapproving once-over. "You're too young to be out here at this time of night."

"It's all right, ma'am. My aunt is picking me up." *Please, please, go away*, she thought, wishing she was in twelfth grade, where they taught the Confundus Charm.

"I don't know..." the woman said dubiously. A few yards away, a man who was also apparently waiting for someone lit up a cigarette.

"Look, I rode the bus by myself and I don't need a babysitter," Alexandra said with deliberate rudeness. The woman meant well, but the last thing Alexandra needed was a well-meaning adult trying to look after her.

The woman made fishy gaping motions with her mouth, then said, "You must have some aunt who puts up with that!" She walked off muttering indignantly to herself.

Alexandra looked around. Farewell was about the size of Larkin Mills, but the downtown area was smaller and less populated, especially at midnight. She could see three motels within walking distance, all flashing neon 'Vacancy' lights. She walked toward the nearest one, adding up her remaining funds and realizing her cash on hand would just barely pay for one night, even if she could convince a check-in clerk that she was old enough to rent a motel room.

"Gave up on your aunt?" someone asked, clapping a hand on her shoulder. She spun around. It was the man who'd been smoking at the bus stop. He'd followed her.

"What's it to you?" Alexandra said. "Buzz off."

He laughed. He was a tall man in a cheap suit, with lanky hair hanging around his face beneath a wide-brimmed hat. She didn't

like his laugh at all. "You are a little spitfire, aren't you? Looking for a place to stay?"

"No." She shook his hand off and resumed walking, but he caught her shoulder again.

"Runaway?" he asked.

"Take your hand off me or I'll scream," she said.

"What will you tell the police?" he asked. "That you're waiting for your aunt to pick you up?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you." She tried to show only implacable calm, but her hand, already in her pocket, fingers wrapped around her wand, was sweaty despite the cold night.

He laughed again, and took a drag from his cigarette. "Sweetheart, you're looking for something, but you've got no idea what you're doing here, do you? I know that look."

"Oh yeah?" Her foot came forward, aiming for his knee, but he twisted and she only caught his shin, wrapped in shiny boot-leather.

He spat out his cigarette and threw her to the ground. "Dammit, you little -"

He blinked stupidly at her for a moment when he saw the wand pointed at him, and then she said, "*Caedarus!*"

The green ball of light smacking into his face sounded like a basketball being kicked against a wall. He flew, landed, and was still. His hat rolled into the street.

Alexandra staggered to her feet and walked over to him. His lips and nose were bloody and his eyes were already swelling shut. At Charmbridge, he'd be up and about after some attention from Mrs. Murphy. Here, Alexandra thought he'd probably look like he came out the loser in a boxing match for a week or two. She needed to get out of here before someone saw them.

Her heart was hammering as she ran down the street away from the prone figure. She half-expected to see Aurors popping out of the darkness at any second. She got all the way to the nearest motel parking lot and hid in the shadows beneath a concrete stairwell,

watching down the street. The man began moving again and picked himself up slowly off the sidewalk. No law enforcement officers, Muggle or wizard, arrived. The man looked around and stumbled off down the street. Alexandra turned away and crept along the darkened walkway in front of the motel. She found a room with no car parked in front of it and no light, and pressed her ear to the door. She heard nothing. Holding her breath, she cast an Unlocking Charm. The door handle clacked and she gave it a twist.

The room was dark and she entered carefully, praying no one would start screaming, but the slice of light falling across the bed showed that it was neatly made and empty, waiting for an occupant. She closed the door, locked it, and threw the deadbolt. If some late traveler should happen to check into this room in the middle of the night, she'd have to deal with it somehow, but she was tired and this was the first bed she'd seen in almost forty-eight hours. Without turning on any lights, she peeled off her jacket, kicked off her boots, and slid beneath the covers, keeping her wand clutched in her hand. She slept fitfully, awakening every time she heard a truck rumble by on the highway or imagined footsteps outside her room.

Nemesis

No one tried to open the door during the night. Alexandra woke up a little after dawn, still tired, and thought about going back to sleep. She decided against it; the longer she stayed here, the greater the chance of getting caught.

After the past two days, she no longer took a bed and a clean bathroom for granted, so she availed herself of the latter and felt much better after a hot shower. It had been a long, grimy bus trip, and last night's altercation had left a couple of bruises. Being accosted by the man in the hat had taken on a slightly unreal aspect. She couldn't quite believe it had happened.

Before now, Alexandra would have denied that she was naïve or sheltered. Her stepfather was a cop, so she had heard plenty of horror stories. It wasn't as if she didn't know what sorts of things happened on the streets, even in Larkin Mills. Yet she was unsettled that a creepy Muggle had disturbed her more than a Dark Wizard could.

The feeling of being alone at the edge of civilization had derailed her single-minded determination with uncomfortable second thoughts. There was nothing Alexandra hated worse than being plagued by doubts and other untoward feelings, and she badly wanted to talk to someone familiar. She thought of calling Payton, and again avoided what she knew would be an awkward conversation. She couldn't begin to explain to him what she was doing out here. It would be easier to talk to Brian, but his mother wouldn't let her.

Claudia had left her three new messages, and Archie one. She deleted them.

She spent a little time casting Glamour Charms to look older again. It was a hasty job, and her reflection in the mirror revealed shadows under her eyes. She took out the Seven-League Boots and put them on, tucking their flared tops beneath the cuffs of her pants. Then she straightened up the room, trying to make it less obvious that someone had slept here, and walked out with her backpack, closing the door behind her as if she were just another guest.

It was cloudy and gray outside, but it didn't look like there had been any precipitation. The street was busy, but the motel parking lot was

still mostly empty. Above the 'Vacancy' sign, the motel advertised a 'Free continental breakfast,' so Alexandra sauntered into the tiny ceramic-tiled front lobby. The 'breakfast' consisted of orange juice, cold cereal, coffee, and donuts. The only other guest in the lobby, a middle-aged man in a worn suit, was dribbling doughnut crumbs and coffee on the newspaper he was reading. Alexandra sat at another table and had a bowl of cereal and a glass of orange juice, and when no one was looking, sneaked a couple of donuts into her pack. The man behind the counter was a dark-skinned Indian whose gaze lingered on her for just a moment, but when she smiled at him and drank her orange juice like someone who belonged here, he nodded and his attention moved elsewhere. She walked out of the motel and down the street.

Farewell was waking up. There were small stores and restaurants that were mostly not open yet, but just down the road was a cluster of gas stations surrounding a large truck stop. Alexandra continued on and ascended the on-ramp to the two-lane state highway that led northwest, toward Four Corners and the town of Orange Rock. Walking along the shoulder, she stuck out her thumb.

A truck carrying bottled water pulled over after Alexandra had walked about a quarter of a mile. The driver was a long-haired Native American, youngish but wearing a conservative long-sleeve shirt beneath a brown vest. He gave her a bemused smile. "If you're trying to get to Albuquerque, you're going the wrong way," he said, jerking his thumb behind them.

"I'm not," Alexandra said. "I'm trying to get to Orange Rock."

The driver raised his eyebrows. "Why would you be going to Orange Rock?"

"I have a friend there. I promised I'd visit him this winter. He didn't believe I'd come."

"So you're hitchhiking your way to a little town in the middle of the Navajo reservation? How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

He laughed. "The hell you are." After considering her a moment, he reached over and opened the door. "Get in."

She climbed in, making sure her body was blocking his view of her hand, which was in her pocket, holding her wand.

The driver was friendly enough. His name was Pete Chimburas. Although they were driving onto the Navajo reservation, Pete was a Ute, originally from Utah. He didn't say much more about that, but he was quite curious about her. She told him her name was Carol Green, and stuck to her story about being a university freshman, but mumbled evasive answers when he pressed her further. After a while, he stopped asking her questions and told her a little about the local area. When they arrived at Orange Rock, though, he said, "So, your boyfriend's an Indian?"

"I didn't say he was my boyfriend."

"Right, your 'friend.'" He grinned. "Is he expecting you?"

"No, it will definitely be a surprise."

"I'll bet. Well, he'll know you're here soon enough."

I hope not, she thought, but she thanked him for the ride as he pulled to a stop in front of a large, flat building that appeared to be a gas station, general store, and supermarket.

"Don't get caught hitchhiking on tribal lands," he said. "Those Navajo cops can be real assholes."

"I'll remember that. Thanks." She hopped to the ground.

Pete Chimburas drove his pallets of water bottles around to the back of the store, while Alexandra took a look around.

Orange Rock was much smaller than Farewell. Driving into town, they'd passed only a few stores, a school, and a Navajo Baptist Church. From the parking lot, Alexandra could see residences and a few taller structures that looked like government buildings scattered

along the roads leading east and south, while to the north along the highway were some large empty lots with faded signs that said they were fairgrounds, and a lot of grazing land.

To the west was a natural landmark that was obviously how the town had gotten its name: a large orange mesolith blotting out its own little segment of the horizon, visible from miles away on an otherwise flat plain of scrub brush and dirt. It resembled the prow of an enormous, ancient ship, thrusting jaggedly up toward the cloudy sky.

It wasn't as cold as it had been back in Illinois, and there was no snow, but it was still close to freezing even with the sun up. Alexandra had some time to kill. She wasn't going to approach John Manuelito's hideout until sundown, when she thought he was more likely to be there, but she couldn't be seen coming for miles. The map Quimley had given her was a topographical survey map. With the help of her Lost Traveler's Compass, she could find her way unerringly to where she wanted to go, even if it was in the middle of the desert, but she would prefer to know more about the area. She straightened her jacket, shouldered her backpack, and walked into the store.

There was a man wearing a cowboy hat behind the counter, ringing up a couple of customers, and a woman putting out vegetables in the small produce section. The aisles were mostly stocked with canned and packaged food. There was a refrigerated case along the back wall with a dairy section, lots of beer and soda, and some frozen meals. The other walls were covered with leaflets and cards tacked to the wood paneling or pinned to bulletin boards: trucks and lumber for sale, babysitting services offered, a 'Sing' announced for February, and an Army recruiting poster. Alexandra found a few road maps by the cash register, but the area she was going to was just a big blank spot on all of them.

"Where you going to?" asked the man behind the counter. He was an Indian. Everyone in the store was an Indian.

"To the Four Corners monument," Alexandra said, since the Four Corners monument was more or less in the right direction.

"How you getting there?" the man asked.

"Hiking."

"Hiking?" He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "Little girl, that's thirty miles in a straight line, and nearly twice that on the highway."

"Do you have any hiking maps?"

He shook his head. "That's not hiking territory. You and your folks want to go hiking, go to the Mesa Cliffs National Park." He pointed at a spot on the map she was examining.

"Thanks," she said, folding the map and putting it back in the rack.

"There's a visitor's rack at the library," he added.

"Library? You've got a library here?"

The man pointed down the road. "Little blue building between the Texaco and the Land Use Office, a block that-a-way."

"Thanks," she said, more enthusiastically. "I'll tell my folks."

She bought two bottles of water, one of which she drank and the other she put in her pack, then walked out of the store and down the street. She found the small blue building - 'Farewell Metropolitan Library - Orange Rock Branch' - with two cars in the otherwise empty parking lot.

The interior was much smaller than the Larkin Mills Library. The entire building would have fit inside Charmbridge Academy's library. It consisted of little more than one large room and a couple of offices, and the 'Visitor's Section' the man at the store had told her about. She checked the old, dog-eared maps left there, but none showed the area she wanted in detail, so she went into the library proper.

There was a woman operating an old computer behind the desk, and a bunch of teenagers sitting around a long table. It didn't look as if any of them were reading; the librarian's lips were pursed disapprovingly, but she did not disturb the socializing teens other than to give them a warning scowl now and then when their voices became too loud.

All of them were Indians. Alexandra hadn't seen another white person since entering Orange Rock. All their eyes were on her as she walked over to the librarian and asked if they had any local area maps with detailed terrain features and old trails.

The librarian was obviously as surprised as the teenagers to see a white girl in her library, but she took Alexandra to a small shelf of books that included histories and photographs of the area. There was an old book with a faded red cover that the librarian said showed some of the historical grazing areas, sheep trails, and borders that shifted every time the government changed reservation boundaries. "Probably the most detailed maps you'll get," the woman said, "but once you leave the highways, you can't really find your way around unless you know the area. You're not from around here, are you?"

It could not have been more obvious that Alexandra wasn't from around here, so she said, "I'm visiting a friend, but he's... taking care of his sheep." She'd read that Navajo were big sheep-herders. "So I thought I'd kill some time at the library."

The librarian made a "hmm" sound, and went back to her desk. Alexandra was surprised but relieved when the woman didn't press further. The teenagers were still staring at her and whispering.

She sat down and studied the big map that unfolded from the folio-sized book, comparing it with the map Quimley had given her. It looked like the place where John Manuelito had built his house was not even in sheep-grazing territory, nor was it within the boundaries of any of the oil and natural gas fields that dotted the region. It was almost a hundred square miles of uninhabited desolation.

Two of the teenage boys turned their chairs around to face Alexandra from across her table. With casual arrogance, they looked over her and the map she was studying. Alexandra guessed that they were sixteen or seventeen. One of them had a handsome face and short hair, unlike his friend, whose face was pock-marked with acne and whose hair hung in a long, black fringe around his head. They were both wearing heavy flannel jackets. The long-haired boy had a wool cap covering the top of his head despite the fact that they were indoors.

She eyed the two of them, saying nothing but wishing she knew a convenient spell to banish teenage boys.

"What are you doing here?" the handsome boy asked in a low voice. There was nothing hostile in his tone, but it was clear that he wasn't just asking what she was doing in the library.

"Visiting a friend," Alexandra said.

"What's your friend's name? Maybe we know him."

"Yeah. We Indians all know each other." The long-haired boy nodded sagely.

Alexandra glanced at the other table, where the other teens were now doing a very bad job of pretending to study the books in front of them. There were two more slightly younger boys and three girls. All of them were older than Alexandra, though a couple of them perhaps only by a year or two.

"I doubt it," she said. "He's not really local."

"You mean he's not Diné?" the short-haired boy asked, with the same air of concerned interest.

Alexandra knew better than to make a scene in a library, so she kept her voice low. "No offense, but I don't know you and you don't know me, so..."

"That's true. That's why we noticed you right away." The boy pointed at his cheek and at her, as if to emphasize his keen perception. "Strangers on the Rez are kind of suspicious."

"You never know who might be a witch," the other boy said.

Alexandra sat up straight. "A witch?"

"You've heard about witches, right?" The first boy lowered his voice, glancing in the librarian's direction. "We call them skinwalkers."

Alexandra felt a chill. "But... wait, I'm not - I mean, you don't really believe in witches, do you?"

The librarian looked up, and the boy frantically waved his hands indicating Alexandra should be quieter.

"You never know," the long-haired boy said.

His friend nodded. "Strange things happen at night out in the desert."

"Like what?" Alexandra asked.

The two boys leaned forward. The teens at the next table were leaning closer too, no longer even pretending that they weren't listening in. "They say witches can transform into animals, and fly. But you don't want to be caught by one. They do terrible things."

"It gives us nightmares, just thinking about the last bodies they found."

"Bodies?" Alexandra swallowed. "People have been killed?"

"Strangers, usually."

"Especially belagana."

"What do the police say?" Alexandra asked.

The first boy snorted. "Come on. Cops are never going to admit someone was killed by a witch, not even Navajo cops."

"Not even when they're found with the soles of their feet cut off and their internal organs stolen," the second boy said gravely.

Alexandra was paler than usual, remembering Quimley's tale of finding skins and entrails in John Manuelito's house. "Quimley does not think they were all from animals."

"Hey, don't worry, if you stay around here, you'll be safe," the first boy said.

"Just don't get caught alone out there at night when the moon comes up," said the second boy.

"I'm not going to be out anywhere at night," Alexandra said, knowing she intended just that.

"That's good. You know, you could hang out with us. Until your friend shows up, I mean."

Alexandra frowned. "Thanks for the invitation, but..."

"It would be for your own protection," the boy persisted. "We could keep an eye on you. Make sure you're not a witch, and we could also protect you against witches and -" he lowered his voice still further "- vampires."

"Vampires?" Alexandra exclaimed, and ducked her head when the librarian glared at her again. At the next table over, the other teens' eyes were wide. One of the girls had put a hand to her mouth.

"Ssh!" one of the other girls said.

"Maybe we shouldn't tell her," the long-haired boy said.

Alexandra looked between them. "Tell me what?"

"It's an ancient tribal secret," the short-haired boy said. He looked over his shoulder at his friends, as if to get their confirmation. No one said anything, so he turned back to her. "We don't usually tell outsiders. You see... we're a very special band of Indians."

"Very ancient and mystical," his friend said.

"Since before the white man came, it's been our sacred duty to protect other humans from witches and vampires. That's why we have the magical ability... to turn into wolves."

Alexandra stared at him. He stared earnestly back at her.

"Wait a minute..." she said.

"Vampires suck," said the other boy.

The girl whose hand was over her mouth doubled over, gasping and sputtering. There was an explosion of laughter from the other teenagers. The two boys' mouths twitched, and the handsome one's

face split into a grin that he could no longer hold back, while the homelier boy leaned forward, bending his head over the table and slapping it with the palm of his hand.

"This is a library, not your homeroom class or the Burger Barn," the librarian said, while Alexandra turned redder and redder.

"Sorry, Mrs. Begay," one of the girls said.

Alexandra stood up, put the book of maps back onto the shelf hard enough to provoke another stormy look from the librarian, and slung her backpack over her shoulder.

"Aw, come on, don't leave," said the laughing storyteller.

"Screw you," she hissed.

"White girl likes you," said his friend.

Amidst more laughter from the teens, Alexandra walked past the wrathful librarian and out the door, her face burning.

She paused when she passed the two cars in the parking lot. One was old and dusty, but with a clean interior and a couple of colorful woven scarves neatly folded in the passenger seat, along with cassette tapes of drum and New Age music. The other car, she knew immediately, belonged to one of the teenagers: it was messy, with the back seat and floors covered with school papers, Burger Barn wrappers, a skateboard, and motorcycling magazines.

She looked over her shoulder, then up and down the street, before taking out her wand. She tapped it against the hood and muttered a curse. There was a gratifying crack from within, and the smell of ozone. With a smirk, she pocketed her wand and walked away.

Alexandra walked down the street and then along the shoulder of the northbound highway. It was an empty, barren landscape. She wasn't planning to hitchhike, but almost everyone who drove by

stopped and asked her if she was lost and needed a ride. There was one white family, obviously tourists, and a Hispanic man driving a flatbed loaded with metal pipes, but everyone else who drove past was Indian. She politely declined each offer, and cars became rarer as the sun climbed into the sky. She checked her Lost Traveler's Compass until it pointed away from the highway, and then she began to walk into the desert.

When she was out of sight of the highway, she began to run.

Desert rocks and scrub brushes flew past beneath her. With her Seven-League Boots, Alexandra leaped over gulches and dry washes with a single step. The air roared past, cold enough to numb her face. Though the sun was high overhead, the desert was cold in January, but she didn't care because the exercise warmed her. There was nothing but flat land between her and the distant mountains in all directions, with the exception of the massive Orange Rock receding behind her. She was like a low-flying bird shooting across the landscape. She'd never really been able to burst into a sprint with these boots before, and when she did, the ground became a blur. She was moving as fast as she did on her broom.

Brown shapes ahead of her suddenly leaped and scattered and then converged into a rolling wave of motion in her path. She saw antlers bouncing up and down over the desert, and at first she thought they were antelopes. Disturbed by the approaching runner, they had burst into flight and were running ahead of her, but she was closing on them quickly. As she came nearer, she gasped in surprise and delight. They were not antelopes, but large, antlered jackrabbits.

"Jackalopes," she breathed. She'd read about the supposedly mythical creatures before she'd ever come to Charmbridge Academy.

The jackalopes fled before her, and she continued to gain ground on them. When they turned to the east, she followed for a while. She was among them now, and some veered off in other directions while others kept trying to outrun her, and she laughed and kept up. They turned north, and she continued pacing them, ignoring the needle of the Lost Traveler's Compass for the moment. She was outrunning jackalopes! She was a witch wearing Seven-League Boots, and nothing on earth could outrun her. No matter what else happened, nothing could take magic away from her.

The poor creatures continued trying to escape their impossibly fast two-legged pursuer. Their eyes showed white all around, and their sides were heaving. They were running out of breath faster than she was, beginning to slow down. Alexandra reached out to touch the back of one of the beasts, and it jumped sideways in a frightened movement and almost lost its sure footing, before hopping madly away from her, separating itself from the pack.

Abruptly, the jackalopes whirled as one, kicking dirt and stones everywhere as their large rabbit feet stomped the ground to halt their flight. Alexandra suddenly faced a picket of sharp antler horns. The jackalopes, unable to outrun her, turned on her.

"Oh, crap," she said. She couldn't halt as quickly as the jackalopes had, and she was hurtling directly at their raised antlers. She took a deep breath, and with a gulp, leaped high into the air.

The Seven-League Boots turned her leap into the stuff of legends. She flew through the air, sailing high above the jackalopes and landing well beyond their reach, as easily as putting one foot in front of the other. Her precarious situation forgotten in a moment, she laughed in delight and kept running. She left the jackalopes far behind and continued on, once more following the needle of the Lost Traveler's Compass.

The boots allowed her to run with little effort, but it was still effort, and eventually she tired. She stopped and sat down on a large rock, surrounded by desert. She drank some water and ate the last of the food in her pack, which by now was stale and barely edible. Checking her map and her compass, she saw that she was less than three miles from where Quimley had found John Manuelito's lair. The sun was still well above the horizon, and in the open desert, she could see a long way.

She wanted to catch John Manuelito in the early evening. Not after dark, when the Dark Convention might be gathering at his place. She didn't think she could take on a whole coven of warlocks.

Near the rock where she sat was one of the arroyos that crisscrossed the landscape. She made her way to a bare, flat spot in the shade at the bottom of the wash and sat down, after taking out her

cloak and wrapping it around herself. Her head tilted forward and she fell asleep.

When she woke up, she cursed. It was almost sundown, later than she'd intended. When she made her way out of the crevasse and looked across the desert, it was already too dark to see more than shadows on the horizon. But she could see no light, no sign of a fire.

Her legs were surprisingly sore. She ignored the ache in her thighs and calves and set off across the desert, keeping a cautious eye on the terrain ahead while she held her wand ready to blast anything that moved. She felt a thrill not unlike what she felt just before a duel with someone who could beat her, like Larry Albo. She considered casting a Silencing Charm on herself; it would prevent her from being heard, but it also meant she wouldn't be able to cast any spells herself until she negated it. The split second it would take to do that could be fatal. So she just trotted along at the speed of a cantering horse.

She only realized she was coming upon what she was looking for when she noticed a few low stars on the horizon disappear, and slowed to a stop. Even at her relaxed pace, two more steps in her Seven-League Boots would have carried her right into the side of the log house. It was a dark bump casting a long shadow across the desert.

Alexandra watched John Manuelito's house from several yards away, scanned the skies, and fought her frustration.

It hadn't occurred to her that after all this traveling to confront her nemesis, he might not be at home.

He could be anywhere. He could be at some other Dark Convention gathering anywhere in the Indian Territories. Or - a far worse thought - he could be back in Larkin Mills even now, looking for her. And if he didn't find her home, what would he do in his frustration?

Alexandra bit her lip. Claudia and Archie were the last people in the world she wanted to see right now, but if something happened to them because of her...

Would you be able to prevent it if you were home? If he finds you before you find him, he's going to have the advantage.

She walked in a slow circle around the dwelling, keeping her distance and always watching the sky, wishing Charlie were here.

She saw a darker shadow along the darkest portion of the perimeter, on the side facing away from the moon. That was the door, or doorway, she supposed.

John could be sleeping. Maybe he slept during the day and came out to do his evil at night. Which meant she should have attacked him while the sun was up.

She walked to a point where she was facing the doorway at a perpendicular angle, unlikely to be seen by anyone emerging unless he happened to turn his head exactly in her direction as he came out. Then she crouched, and waited.

Alexandra could be patient when she had to be. But after crouching motionless for over an hour, she had to rise and stretch and walk around a little. By now, she was sure that John Manuelito was not inside, which meant she had two options: wait for him to return, which might not even be this night, or leave.

Leave and do what?

She eyed the dark doorway as she turned a third option over in her mind. Was it risky? Probably. Quimley had gotten in and out without difficulty, but Quimley was an elf. He might not have mentioned having to cross magical wards or bypass traps.

She approached the dwelling. When she got to the doorway, she found there was no door at all, just a dark hole.

She closed her eyes and tried to use her witch-senses. She didn't feel anything. Did that mean there was no Dark magic here, or only that she wasn't very good at feeling it yet?

She cast a spell to reveal wards and alarms, and a green line appeared all around the doorway. She almost laughed. It was high school magic: a spell they learned at Charmbridge.

"Some Dark Wizard you are, John." She broke the ward with a wave of her wand. She almost went in immediately, but she cast a second

spell, and this time found a ward that didn't glow and whose nature she didn't immediately recognize.

"Okay," she muttered, "so you're a little bit clever." She began undoing it. She'd learned much more than Mr. Newton had taught, but her practice in bypassing wards and alarms had been theoretical until now. When she no longer felt the cobweb touch of something suspended in the air before her, she thought she had dissolved the magic, but she could not be certain. Several more attempts to detect Dark Magic and wards brought nothing to light.

With a final look over her shoulder and up at the sky, she stepped inside. When nothing happened, she cast a Light Spell to illuminate the interior.

The log house had a packed dirt floor. It was cold and drafty. The gaps between the logs had not been filled with mud or covered with much of anything. One wall was bare except for a pallet with rolled up blankets. Next to the pallet was a large plastic ice chest. There was also a camping table, a large, flat, pedestal-shaped rock that served as a second table and had obviously been brought here from elsewhere, some lanterns, and several wooden shelves with an assortment of knives, silverware, bowls, plates, and bottles. Against the opposite wall stood a rickety old bookcase holding books and jars. In the center of the floor was a black fire pit, cold and full of ashes, with a cauldron suspended over it from a metal tripod. Alexandra pointed her lit wand into the cauldron, but it was dry and empty. One of the bottles on the shelves was labeled Firewhiskey; the rest were smaller and contained spices, hot sauce, and cooking oil. Some of the books on the bookcase were magical volumes. Alexandra recognized a green cover as an advanced Transfiguration textbook. Others were Muggle books: there was one about geology, another one about Southwestern geography, and a couple of detective novels. The jars next to the books were unlabeled and she couldn't make out their contents without opening them.

It all looked quite mundane, as if John simply slept and ate here.

There was a map and a piece of parchment lying on the stone pedestal. Alexandra knelt to examine them. She almost laughed when she saw that the map was the same USGS Topographical map as her own, showing the Four Corners region.

On the parchment was also a map, but it was hand-drawn. Alexandra saw immediately that the crudely-sketched mountains, creeks, and landmarks on the latter were approximations of the terrain features on the USGS map. John had apparently been creating his own map, working from a Muggle one, but why?

There were symbols and writing on the parchment. Alexandra moved her wand closer, and saw that there was one spot in particular circled and marked with an astrological symbol. She recognized it from all of Forbearance and Sonja's charting of her horoscope: it represented the full moon. Directly beneath it was a reddish blotch in an empty space between two landmarks she couldn't make out. One appeared to be a tower of some sort, and the other a ridge or a valley. The writing was in Latin letters, but it was not English.

Alexandra picked the parchment up.

It didn't feel like parchment; it felt like skin. Perhaps vellum. But no sooner had she picked it up than it burst into green flames, singeing her fingers. She cursed and dropped it, right on the paper map. She snatched at them both, but all she did was knock the vellum to the floor while grabbing the other map. She tried without success to stamp out the flames. An Extinguishing Spell snuffed them, but all that was left was a scrap of the material. When she retrieved it, only the moon and the blotch and the tower remained, surrounded by curled, blackened edges.

Something scuttled against the wall where the pallet lay.

Alexandra held her wand up, causing shadows to move along the inside of the circular chamber, but nothing else moved. She stepped toward the pallet and rolled bedding, while tucking the map and vellum scrap into her coat pocket.

There was a scraping sound on wood, to her right. She jerked back in the direction of the wooden bookcase. A solid shape darkened the shadows beneath it, and she stepped sideways to shine her light under and on the other side of it. She couldn't quite see the floor and the corner behind it, so she began crouching slowly, listening for the slightest sound.

The wind blew across the desert outside. Distantly, an owl hooted.

That skittering noise again. Something dashed from beneath the lowest shelf and launched itself at her.

Alexandra slashed the air with her wand and spoke an incantation, and a pink burst of light washed against a grotesque dwarfish figure for an instant before it tumbled to the ground three feet away. It bounced, bumped against the wall, and came running right back at her. It had stick limbs and a shrunken bony torso wrapped in something - rags? bandages? - but perched on its shoulders, instead of a head...

It was literally climbing up her body even as she stumbled and fell away from it, and it kept coming, tiny child-like hands with fingers like dried twigs that tore at her clothes and ripped her skin, and a horrible gaping beak - it had a skull like some sort of bird or dinosaur and Alexandra couldn't quite tell if there were eyes inside those dark sockets, but it was looking at her and when she grabbed it with one hand and tried to pull it off her, it was too strong. Its hands wrapped around her wrist and she tried to fling it away, but it clung to her and that long beak-like protuberance gaped open like giant bony shears, about to snap shut on her arm. Alexandra thrust her wand directly into an eye socket and cast a Bursting Curse. The bubble of light and whoosh of air made it let go, but it didn't burst. Before Alexandra could even get to her feet, it was grabbing her knees. She kicked it away. Its hands snatched at her boot and dead bony fingers scraped against her toe as it went flying. It hit a shelf, spilling bottles and silverware to the ground, and in an instant came leaping at her again. There was no mistake this time - with or without eyes, those dark holes were staring at her. It got its tiny hands around her neck and began choking her while she twisted and jerked her head violently to avoid the pointy beak. When it couldn't reach her eyes, the point stabbed her neck instead.

She felt pain and blood, and she blasted it again using the first spell that came to her lips: a fireball. It wasn't the smartest spell to use on something clinging to her, but it rolled to the floor, flaming and smoking, while Alexandra slapped herself to put out the flames licking at her coat, ignoring the blisters on her face and hands and the blood coursing down her neck.

Still smoking, the gruesome child-like creature snapped at her ankle. With nimbleness enhanced by the Seven-League Boots, Alexandra

danced out of the way, then lifted her other foot and stomped on the little monster as hard as she could. Skeleton or mummy or whatever the withered thing was, it should have crunched and crumbled to dust, but it didn't. It was more solid and unbreakable than it had any right to be. It grabbed her other boot and as she tried to kick it away, its beak slashed her knee painfully.

"Caedarus!" she said, and the green ball of light from her wand sent it flying. She unleashed a Conflagration Spell. Flames washed across it and set the bookshelf on fire, but the homunculus of skin and bone came rushing at her again, clambering up her body and trying to bite her face off. She hit it with a clenched fist, to no effect. It clawed at her stomach, and Alexandra almost dropped her wand to wrestle it with both hands. It snatched hold of her belt with one hand and grabbed her breast painfully with the other. She slapped its head away desperately to keep it from plunging its beak directly into her stomach, and almost lost a finger.

There was something absurd about fighting for her life with something barely the size of a toddler, but the creature was relentless and untiring and its tiny hands possessed an inhuman strength.

Alexandra hexed it hard enough to knock it loose, rolled away, and chanted lightning from her wand. Jagged arcs of electricity flickered around the monstrous dwarfish form. The shreds of cloth still clinging to it blackened and charred. The sleeping pallet and blankets behind it ignited. With the bookshelf already burning, the interior of the log dwelling was filling with fire and smoke.

A Spinning Jinx spun it into the flames before it could attack again. Alexandra tried Banishing it, but whatever it was, it was not a spirit.

The smoke and heat were becoming intense. Books went up in flames, and the logs were catching fire. Alexandra began coughing. The terrible creature came leaping out of the flames.

"Levicorpus!" Alexandra shouted, and the thing rose into the air and spun helplessly in the middle of the chamber. Alexandra hexed and cursed and smote it and even tried a Stunning Charm and a Full-Body Bind Spell. Nothing made it stop thrashing and resisting. She brought her arm to her face to cover her mouth; smoke was choking her lungs.

Dangling in the air, the abomination twitched and writhed, a mummified infant in a smoking shroud. It wriggled and clacked its beak furiously. The dark sockets of its skull turned in her direction with inhuman malice that sent a shiver through her.

She fell to her hands and knees and backed toward the entrance. Fire was crawling up the walls of the log house, and some of the jars exploded with the heat. The monster's baby feet scratched against the roof at the center of the dome overhead, and Alexandra saw with horror that it was trying to gain purchase against the ceiling, to pull or push itself against her spell. Whether it could or not, the roof would come down eventually - but probably not before her Levitation Spell wore off.

From the doorway, she pointed her wand at the monster again and said, "Feordupois." It plummeted to the ground with a thump and immediately began clawing its way toward her. She cast the Deadweight Spell again, and again, until the creature thrashed helplessly like an undead moth pressed under a glass, pinned but not crushed, and then Alexandra rose to her feet and stumbled away from the house. She turned and held her wand out with a trembling arm and poured flames into the dwelling, until the log house was a blazing inferno. The heat washed over her from ten yards away.

"Burn, you little monster!" she screamed, dripping blood and peeling skin. She almost fell to her knees, but instead she turned and ran. The burning house lit up the desert like a bonfire. If John Manuelito and his friends were anywhere between Orange Rock and the mountains to the north, they couldn't fail to see it.

She was too weak to run far. She only made it to the wash where she'd napped that afternoon, and slowed before she ran right over the edge. The moon illuminated the dry gulley and she stood on the edge of it, breathing heavily. She looked over her shoulder, and sucked in a breath when she saw shadows descending from the sky and others materializing out of the air around the burning conflagration. She leaped into the gulley, and found strength she didn't know she had. She ran along it, not even knowing what direction she was going, only that it was leading her away from John Manuelito's coven. She ran for what felt like miles before she finally slowed again as the wash flattened into a sandy mouth.

The moon was lower but it was still hours before dawn. Alexandra dropped her pack, and said, "Lumos" so that she could see inside it, hoping to find the last of the water she'd stored there.

She heard a pop behind her. She was already flinging a spell before she finished turning. Her hex rebounded as the tall figure behind her cast a Blocking Jinx.

"Expelliarmus!" she shouted, and while the wizard was deflecting this, too, Alexandra turned him on his head with a flip of her wand. He grunted as his head struck the ground, and her second Disarming Spell sent his wand flying.

He rolled and disappeared.

That's impossible, she thought. There was no such thing as an Invisibility Spell, and she hadn't heard the 'pop' of Apparition. And she'd Disarmed him. She shot flames from her wand, scouring the ground where her opponent had been a moment ago, and then she flung a cloud of thorns spraying through the air in an arc around her.

The flames left a few sparks burning in the hard, dry desert plants they'd touched; the thorns all pattered to the ground like dying flies.

Hands grabbed her ankles and hurled her feet upward. She threw her arms out to keep from being planted in the ground face-first and rolled over, just in time for her adversary to descend on her. A knee landed in her stomach, knocking all the wind out of her and almost making her vomit. A large, heavy hand caught the wrist of her wand-hand and held it pinned to the ground, but it was the knife that caught her attention, as it gleamed in the moonlight and then was pressed against her neck.

"Not one word," the man said breathlessly. "Don't make me cut your throat."

She couldn't have said a word if she'd wanted to - his knee was practically forcing her diaphragm up her throat, and she couldn't breathe.

"Let go of your wand," he said. "Easy, now - just let go of it."

It was hard to obey; his grip on her wrist was hard enough to grind bones together. She forced her fingers to open, and the wand slipped out of them. Immediately, the man on top of her snatched it away and rose to his feet, grabbing the front of her cloak and yanking her to her feet as well. She gulped air and was prevented from doubling over only by her assailant's iron grip. Tears of pain were streaming down her cheeks. She couldn't say anything for a moment, then, eying the knife, decided she'd rather die quickly than with the soles of her feet cut off. She kicked desperately with her knee, followed by an attempt to stomp his feet, but he anticipated both motions, and flung her to the ground. The impact knocked the breath out of her again.

"You are one crazy girl," he said. "Are you trying to make me kill you?"

The moon was bright in the sky, so she could see the man's features. He had long black hair, a prominent nose and cheekbones, dark skin, and a headband around his forehead - definitely Native American. But he was not John Manuelito.

"You're not going to kill me?" she said, dazed. She could feel her wand lying only a yard away, and started to roll toward it, only for the man's heavy boot to pin her shoulder painfully against the ground.

"You sure make it tempting," he said. "Is that what Aurors do where you're from? Here in Din^otah, we don't kill damn fool kids if we can help it. You give me one more bit of trouble, though, and I'll put a Transfiguration on you that you didn't learn in your belagana school."

"Aurors?" Alexandra repeated, feeling as foolish as she had in the library, with a lot more injury added to insult. "You're an Auror?"

"Henry Tsotsie," he said. "Din^otah Auror Authority. And you're under arrest."

A Gathering of Witches

In retrospect, Alexandra thought that keeping her mouth shut would probably have been smarter than asking "What for?"

She didn't know where Henry Tsotsie went after leaving her sitting uncomfortably on the cold, hard ground wrapped in silver ropes. He'd taken her wand and her pack, and then he'd taken a leather pouch off his belt, turned it upside-down, and dumped a four-foot rattlesnake onto the ground in front of her.

It coiled up and raised its head and immediately began vibrating its tail with a sound that triggered an instinctive reaction. Alexandra pushed herself backward away from the snake, but the Din[◆] Auror stood behind her, blocking her retreat.

"Stay put and don't move. It won't bite you unless you antagonize it," he said.

"Are you nuts?" Alexandra asked in a low voice.

"I'll be back. Don't worry, if you make it bite you, we'll probably get you an Antivenom Potion in time."

"Back from where? This is totally child endangerment!"

Her only answer was a pop, and then she almost fell backward. The snake buzzed again.

Alexandra shivered. Tsotsie hadn't taken her boots away. Maybe she could get rid of the snake with an improvised charm, and then - what? Take off across the desert without her wand, arms tied to her sides?

"I like snakes, honest," she mumbled. The snake's head swiveled side to side, and it gave another warning rattle.

She sat still until the snake stopped buzzing. *You should be hibernating right now*, she thought. It probably wasn't very happy about being left out in the cold.

Bruised, bloody, blistered, and exhausted, she began to feel like it wouldn't matter if the snake did bite her. She was more worried about what John Manuelito and his fellow witches were up to.

Nonetheless, she found herself nodding off. Her head tilted forward and her eyes closed.

She jerked awake when she heard a pop again, and then Henry Tsotsie was leaning over her.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

Alexandra became conscious of a weight sliding against her chest and belly. She gulped, her throat suddenly very dry. The big rattlesnake had slithered beneath the magical ropes and coiled up inside her jacket. She feared it would be disturbed now by the thumping of her heart.

It didn't start buzzing until Tsotsie slid his hand down the front of her jacket.

"Watch it!" Alexandra said, but he snatched the snake out deftly without touching her or provoking it to strike.

"I gave it some of my body heat before I left," he said, "but it must have liked yours more." He held open the pouch at his side, and dumped the snake inside.

"I have a snake familiar, too," Alexandra said. "Except mine's not poisonous."

"It's not my familiar. We don't have familiars." Tsotsie looked at his hand and frowned. "You're bleeding."

"You didn't notice while you were beating me up?"

"While I was deflecting your curses, you mean."

"I didn't know you were an Auror. I thought you were a Dark Wizard. It was self-defense."

The Navajo wizard produced his wand and cast a Light Spell. Alexandra was a little disappointed that he used the same '*Lumos*' incantation that other wizards used. He took a closer look at her face.

"Why did you leave me here?" she asked.

"We were inspecting your handiwork."

"You mean John Manuelito's house? The fire?"

His grave expression turned graver. "What do you know about John Manuelito?"

"He's a Dark Wizard."

"A friend of yours?"

"Hell no! I came here to, uh, arrest him."

"Arrest?" Henry Tsotsie's thick black eyebrows scrunched up. "What Territory makes children Aurors?"

"I mean, like, a citizen's arrest."

Tsotsie gave her a blank look in response.

"I was going to capture him, then call the WJD," Alexandra said.

She didn't think he believed her. He hauled her to her feet and fastened a hand around her upper arm. Without warning, they Apparated. It did nothing for Alexandra's already disoriented and shaken state. She would have fallen to her knees if he hadn't held her up when they reappeared just off the edge of a dark desert highway. A few feet away, moonlight shined down on a large pickup truck.

Tsotsie opened the passenger side door. "Get in."

"Can you untie me?"

"No."

She stared at him, but when she saw he wasn't joking, she stepped up into the cab and squirmed into the seat with difficulty. At least it was more comfortable than the desert floor. He slammed the door shut and walked around the truck, then slid behind the steering wheel and started the engine.

"Look, I'm really sorry," she said. "I told you, I didn't know you were an Auror."

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you - I was looking for John Manuelito."

"To arrest him." Henry Tsotsie's expression was neutral, but his tone was skeptical. "How did you know where John Manuelito's hogan was?"

"An elf told me."

Tsotsie turned on the headlights, then rubbed his head as they rolled onto the highway. He'd done that several times now. She supposed Disarming him and dropping him on his head might explain some of his unfriendliness.

"Do you know how much trouble you're in?" he asked.

"You have no idea."

"I think I do. John Manuelito had a witch's heart even before he went to Charmbridge Academy. Then he came back, and now he consorts with Navajo and *belagana* witches. You think just because you're in the Indian Territories you can get away with practicing witchcraft here?"

"What's wrong with being a witch? Do Indians only let men practice magic?"

Tsotsie glanced sideways at her. They passed a sign that said Orange Rock was ten miles ahead.

"I don't mean 'witch' the way you do," he said. "We call anyone who practices evil magic - 'Dark Arts', as you *belagana* call it - a witch."

"What do you call a *belagana* girl with a wand, then?"

"Trouble." The Auror shook his head. "You're a fool if you think Manuelito won't cut out your heart the moment it suits him. And when I turn you over to the Wizard Justice Department, your fate won't be much better. Help me find him, and I'll speak for you as best I can."

"Wait, you think I'm his *girlfriend* or something?" Alexandra was so angry that for a moment she couldn't speak. "John Manuelito tried to *kill* me! He came to Charmbridge Academy and my home town to get at me. I came here to get him!"

Tsotsie didn't say anything.

"I'm not a witch!" Alexandra said. "I mean, I am, but not a Navajo witch! I mean, obviously I'm not a Navajo but - you know what I mean!"

Tsotsie remained silent.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Orange Rock."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"First, get some healing potions and burn salve for your injuries. Then figure out what you're really doing here. Why did you set John Manuelito's hogan on fire?"

"I was attacked by some kind of baby mummy with a monster-head that he left there."

The skin around Tsotsie's mouth and eyes tightened. She didn't think he bought that any more than the mention of an elf.

"Aren't you even going to search the remains of his house?" she asked.

"Other Aurors are there now. If they find a baby mummy, they'll let me know."

"Why didn't you arrest him already?"

"We've been hunting for John Manuelito and his fellow witches for months. How did you find him?"

"I told you -"

"An elf."

"Why are you asking me questions if you're not going to believe me?"

He kept driving. They were not heading toward the town of Orange Rock - they were heading for the towering rock itself, the immense landmark that cast a ruddy orange reflection even in the moonlight.

"If you didn't know where John's house was, how did you find me?" she asked.

"The Trace."

Alexandra was startled. "The Trace?"

"You attacked someone in Farewell, broke into a motel, then cast more spells as soon as you got to Orange Rock. You'd left the library before I got there, but it wasn't hard to figure out who the white girl was that everyone was talking about. Apparently you think the rules about underage use of magic don't apply in the Indian Territories."

"You Trace underage witches and wizards too?"

"Not ours. But we like to know when strangers come into Din^otah and start waving their wands around. I picked up your Trace from Central Territory."

"Maybe if you'd been Tracing John Manuelito before he got kicked out of Charmbridge Academy, you'd have known what he was up to," Alexandra said bitterly.

The Auror was silent for a long time after that. They left the highway and began driving along a dirt road toward the massive formation rising out of the desert floor.

"Is your headquarters under Orange Rock?" she asked.

He slammed on the brakes. Alexandra hadn't been able to put her seat belt on with her arms bound to her sides, and Tsotsie hadn't put it on for her, so her face almost went into the dashboard before he grabbed her.

"Why would you ask that?" he demanded.

She blinked at him. "I saw on the maps and geography books at the library, Orange Rock is like a big sacred site for Navajos, right? So maybe it was a place of power for Indian wizards, before the Confederation, um, sealed it off."

Tsotsie began driving again. They didn't drive directly to the massive rock, however. When they were about a mile from it, they went off-road and detoured around it, heading toward a much smaller rock

formation. It was an impressive landmark in its own right, towering hundreds of feet above the desert floor like the jagged spines of some ancient, petrified monster, but dwarfed in proximity to Orange Rock, it was easy to overlook.

The old, battered double-wide trailer sitting next to it looked entirely out of place, like a discarded beer can. Tsotsie drove right up to it and parked next to the only other vehicle, an old gray jeep.

Alexandra squinted at the trailer and tried to see it as a Muggle, which now that she'd gotten used to seeing as a witch was harder to do. It was not so much a matter of 'turning off' her witch-sight, but looking at what was there if she ignored it. Without her witch-sight, only the jeep stood out in the jumble of rocks.

"That's kind of an ugly thing to use as a wizard meeting place," she said.

"Yes, it is." Tsotsie got out of the truck and came around to open her door, and helped her out a little bit more gently than when he'd dragged her into the truck.

"Why don't you make it one of those round traditional buildings?" she asked.

"A hogan." He gripped her upper arm and led her to the door to the trailer.

Alexandra wasn't surprised when he opened the door and the interior was, in fact, a vast round chamber that was much larger than the trailer outside. They stepped into what seemed to be a mud-walled dwelling of great size with a hard-packed dirt floor and openings leading off to other chambers. Some of these had dirt floors, but in one Alexandra saw sand that didn't match the color of the desert outside. There were men and women moving around between the rooms, all of them Indians, mostly dressed in practical Muggle clothing, though Alexandra saw a few beaded vests and one man carrying a long wooden stick that could have been a wand except that it was too thick and had an eagle's claw at one end.

Henry Tsotsie led Alexandra into a small, round room with a bench and a cot. It took her a moment to realize that it was a prison cell. He gestured with his wand, and the silver ropes around her loosened and fell off, disappearing before they hit the ground.

He stepped back into the larger room outside, and cast a spell that caused a glowing line to materialize across the threshold.

"Age Line," he said. "Don't try to leave."

"I have to go to the bathroom," Alexandra said.

"I'll have a Healer here shortly. Once she examines you, you can use the facilities." He noted the expression on her face, and for the first time, he showed a hint of a smile. "I suppose you thought you'd have to use a clay pot or a hole in the ground?"

She glared at him, but he was already walking away.

She tested the Age Line, of course. Not that she would try to escape, or even leave her cell. But she had to test it. She held a hand out cautiously, and felt neither pain nor resistance. She could reach outside the room. She tried taking a step, and at the point where her balance would have shifted over the line, she was stopped by an invisible barrier. She leaned against it, and found herself held up by the barrier. It seemed pretty effective.

She couldn't help wondering what would keep her from Apparating out, or trying to go through the walls if she knew the right spells. And if she had her wand. She supposed they had ways to prevent that as well. She lay down on her back on the cot and stared up at the brown mud ceiling. Contemplating escape was just something to occupy her mind anyway. She had no idea what she was going to do now.

She didn't nod off this time. She was in too much pain. Her face and hands hurt, and so did the scratches and bruises where the creature in John Manuelito's hogan had clawed and bitten her. When a woman walked into the room, Alexandra turned her head in the newcomer's direction, but barely had the strength or will to sit up, so she didn't.

"You tested the Age Line," the woman said. She was about Claudia's age. She had lighter skin than Henry Tsotsie, and was wearing a long black dress with a red and white shawl twisted around her shoulders. She had blue cloth wrapped around her wrists and her jet-black hair was tied up in a bun with red string.

"How do you know?" Alexandra asked.

Amused, the woman leaned over her and took a strand of Alexandra's hair and tugged at it to hold in front of Alexandra's eyes. It was white.

"It turned my hair white?" Alexandra groaned. "Is that permanent?"

The woman's smile faded. "Henry just left you lying here covered in blood and blisters?"

"I think I made him angry."

The woman's expression was serious now. "Consorting with witches will make people angry in these parts. You're a foolish little girl. Do you have any idea what you're messing with?" She put a hand beneath Alexandra's shoulder. "Sit up, please." She had brought a leather purse into the room with her, which she now unslung and set on the floor. She proceeded to take potion bottles out of it.

Alexandra told her, "I wasn't consorting with witches. I came here to bring John Manuelito to justice for what he did to me and my friends. I don't understand why you're assuming I'm an... evil witch. None of you have even asked me my name."

"Your name is Alexandra Quick." The woman smiled at Alexandra's startled reaction. "We went through your pack. Henry is contacting the Central Territory Trace Office now. We'll know all about you soon enough. My name is Billi Tewawina, by the way." She displayed a long, thin wand with bits of colored paint at the end of it, and conjured a plain, woven curtain that materialized in the air and hung across the doorway without visible support. "I think you'll need to take your clothes off if you want me to heal all those wounds."

Alexandra peeled off her jacket, and then a little more reluctantly, took off her shirt and her pants, after very carefully sliding off her Seven-League Boots and setting them on the cot next to her. Tewawina sucked on her lower lip when she saw the raw, bloody patch of skin just below Alexandra's navel and the gash in her neck.

"Lie down," she said, and Alexandra did. Tewawina cast a spell Alexandra recognized as a basic blood-clotting charm on her neck, then poured some oil on the lower wound and rubbed it against her. It stung at first, and Alexandra winced.

"Something evil did this," Tewawina said.

"No kidding." Alexandra showed the Healer her wrist, which was bruised and cut from the creature's beak, and then pointed at her knee. "It was this... mummy or skeleton, but it was the size of a child. It attacked me -" She stopped when she saw Billi Tewawina's horrified reaction. "What?"

Tewawina muttered something in a language Alexandra didn't recognize. Then she said in English, "I need to tell Henry about this."

"I tried to. He didn't believe me."

The Healer put burn salve on Alexandra's face and hands and used charms and lotions on all the bruises and cuts she'd acquired from ankle to shoulder. "Some of these will leave scars, even with magic," Tewawina said. "You'll have a scar here." She laid a fingertip gently on the skin of Alexandra's lower belly. "And here -" She pointed at Alexandra's neck. "And probably here," she added, holding up Alexandra's wrist, "though the cut is not deep and a Blessing just might rid your flesh of the evil."

"Like an Indian blessing?" Alexandra asked.

"Like that, yes. Don't worry, I learned the same magical theory and Healing arts you Colonials do."

"I wasn't worried, and I'm not a Colonial."

Tewawina looked with amusement and a little sympathy at the nearly naked girl on the cot. "You are one pale paleface. And you're a paleface witch, which makes you a Colonial."

"Oh." Alexandra sighed. "You guys really don't like white people much, do you?"

Tewawina laughed. "Some of my best friends are white people." She waved her wand and conjured a robe, which she handed to Alexandra. "I think this will be more comfortable than these burnt, bloody things."

"Thank you." Alexandra took the robe. While she put it on, she asked, "So what's going to happen to me?"

"I'm going to tell Henry about your injuries. I suppose he'll have some more questions for you. I don't know why you came here, but you're a foolish girl."

This had already been said, and Alexandra had already answered, so she didn't reply this time. Tewawina got to her feet.

"Can I use the bathroom?" Alexandra asked.

Tewawina sucked on her lip again, then nodded. "Don't make trouble. I'm a Healer, not an Auror, but I can still curse you good." She leaned closer and whispered in Alexandra's ear: "Special *Indian* curses." The Healer banished the Age Line and walked her through the doorway.

Alexandra didn't get to see much more of the interior of this strange headquarters, as the restroom turned out to be right next to her 'cell.' It had ordinary tile flooring and plumbing no different from that at Charmbridge. Billi Tewawina waited, then led Alexandra back to her cell and cast an Age Line just as Henry Tsotsie had.

"If you're smart, you'll cooperate with Henry and have nothing to do with John Manuelito or any other two-heart Navajos," she said.

"Thanks," Alexandra said.

"When Navajos go bad, they go really bad," Tewawina said, and left Alexandra alone.

Keeping an eye on the doorway, Alexandra took the map and the scrap of vellum that she had recovered from John Manuelito's house out of her pocket.

The map had been opened and folded to a section of desert to the west of Orange Rock, near the Arizona border. Alexandra studied the map and the charred piece of vellum, trying to correlate what had been on the now-incinerated portion with the features of the topographical map. There was a small range of flattened hills extending in a roughly northwesterly direction that might have been the valley on the vellum map, and the 'tower' she thought John had drawn seemed to be located in the hard terrain north of the hills, at the base of a mountain range that rose up to fold into the Rockies.

Between them was nothing but high desert.

She put the pieces back into her pocket and lay back on the cot. She rolled her singed jacket, still smelling of smoke, under her head and fell asleep.

She woke when someone kicked her cot. She roused and sat up, and found herself looking up at the unfriendly face of Henry Tsotsie.

He dumped some clothes in her lap. "These should fit you, more or less. Get dressed. You won't really fit in wearing robes on the Reservation - not that you're going to be here very long."

"Where am I going?" Alexandra asked, looking at the jeans and long-sleeved pullover, both of them a little large for her and faded with wear.

"Back to Central Territory."

"What?" Alexandra couldn't read the Auror's expression.

"Apparently you're well known back home. A Special Inquisitor Diana Grimm will be waiting to pick you up at the Portkey Station personally. I'm guessing you know her, since she obviously knows you."

"Yeah, I know her." Alexandra's fingers dug into the clothes on her lap. "So, just like that, you're going to send me back by Portkey? What about John Manuelito?"

"John Manuelito is our problem."

"He's not just your problem. He's -"

"Yes, we appreciate you coming to Din~~o~~tah to catch Dark Wizards for us. We Indians can always use help from fourteen-year-old white girls. But we'll take it from here. Come on." Tsotsie turned his back on her and walked out of the room. She followed him, and he pointed at the restroom. "Use the facilities if you have to and change. We have a long drive ahead of us and I don't plan to stop."

Alexandra went into the restroom and put on the pants and shirt under the robes Billi Tewawina had given her. As she expected, they were loose on her. When she emerged, the Navajo Auror walked outside. She followed him sullenly.

The jeep was gone, but his pickup truck was there. The sun was up, and high enough that Alexandra realized she must have slept longer than she'd thought. She'd been able to wash her face in the restroom, but she hadn't had a shower since the previous evening in the motel room. She felt grimy and sweaty. Her stomach rumbled when she smelled cooked food upon opening the door to the truck. Tsotsie gestured at a paper bag sitting on the divider between the front seats. "Breakfast. Enjoy it. We won't be stopping to eat along the way."

She got into the truck, and asked, "What about my backpack and my wand?"

"Your backpack is back there." Tsotsie gestured with a thumb at the truck bed behind them. "Minus a couple of the illegal items. I have your wand. I'll give them both back to you just before you take the Portkey back to Central Territory."

The paper bag contained a fat breakfast burrito wrapped in foil and a cup of hot tea. Alexandra unwrapped the burrito and said, "Thank you. For the food, I mean."

Tsotsie grunted as they headed away from the trailer. Orange Rock cast a long shadow over them. Seen up close in the daylight, it was even more magnificent than it had been at night, with enormous spurs of rock thrusting hundreds of feet out of the ground. Most of its upper ridge was made up of jagged, toothy stone formations along a quarter-mile profile, except for a slightly flat area at the very crown of the monument, with a straight lip overlooking the desert between it and the town named after it.

Alexandra thought she could feel power residing in its stony heart, but she wasn't sure that wasn't her imagination. It was such an impressive natural wonder, standing alone here in the desert, a million-year-old sentinel, she supposed Muggles, too, would feel something in its presence.

"This was a place of power for you once, wasn't it?" she said.

"It still is." But Tsotsie barely glanced at the rock, while Alexandra continued staring at it until it was behind them.

"Does that mean you can still use it to... do magical rituals?" Alexandra asked.

"You think like a wizard," Tsotsie said.

"Isn't that what you are?"

The Navajo shrugged.

"Not every Indian can do magic, right? You've got wizards and Muggles just like we do."

"We don't call people who don't do magic 'Muggles.'"

Alexandra frowned and ate more of the breakfast burrito. They seemed to be heading northeast, getting on a state highway that bypassed Farewell and headed for the Colorado border.

"How far away is this Portkey, anyway?"

"A little over a hundred miles."

"There's no Portkey anywhere closer?"

"We don't like Portkeys in Din^otah. They make it easier for wizards to visit us."

No Automagicka either, I'll bet, Alexandra thought. She waited until she had finished her burrito before asking, "Have you found John Manuelito?"

"I told you, leave that to us."

"How about the thing that attacked me? Did you find bones or anything?"

"There was nothing left in the ashes. I don't know what sort of creature you fought, but it's burned up now. Maybe it was an elf."

Alexandra almost choked on her tea. "I wasn't imagining it, and Ms. Tewawina wasn't imagining my injuries when she treated me!"

"I didn't say you imagined it. When we catch John Manuelito, we'll ask him what it was and let you know if you need any additional treatment. I hope Billi didn't fill your ears with stories about corpse sickness and Nemesis Spirits. She believes anything dark and evil where Navajo witches are concerned. As if Hopi witches are any better."

Alexandra would very much like to have asked about 'corpse sickness' and 'Nemesis Spirits,' but she was certain the Navajo Auror would not answer, so instead she said, "So you haven't caught him."

The Auror didn't say anything, and looked angry at having given that much away.

Half an hour later, they were on a lonely desert highway with no other vehicles or signs of habitation in sight. Every now and then they passed a road sign or mile marker, and sometimes Alexandra could see small dwellings, wooden fences, or sheep in the distance, but it was an empty, sparsely inhabited land they were driving through.

"I don't want to go home," Alexandra said, looking out the window.

A minute passed. Then Tsotsie said, "Din^otah is not a destination for runaways. We don't need outsiders coming here causing trouble."

"You know, I could actually be helpful."

"You've been very helpful. Vandalizing cars, burning down houses, attacking Aurors."

"That's not fair. You don't know the whole story, any of it. And if I were just a clueless outsider, how did I find John Manuelito's hogan?"

Henry Tsotsie gave the appearance of thinking that over, then said, "So how did that turn out for you?"

"I didn't know John wouldn't be home -"

"You mean you came all the way from Central Territory to Din^otah to track down a Navajo witch in the middle of the desert and it never occurred to you that he might not be sitting in his hogan waiting for you to show up?"

"I was going to wait -" she said, but Tsotsie cut her off again.

"You were going to wait, but since you're young, you chose not to, and instead you decided to go into the hogan of a Navajo witch and

trip every ward and curse he left behind. And because you're such a talented young witch, you survived, but not without burning down the hogan and destroying every piece of evidence we might have used to find out where John Manuelito is and what he's up to."

"I didn't know there was a Din~~o~~tah Auror Authority to contact -"

"Just like you didn't know we had a Trace Office. I suppose you would have contacted us, if you'd known?" Tsotsie looked at her, but then his eyes moved past her shoulder. Alexandra turned her head and something gray blurred past in the scrub along the side of the road. "So the result of your adventure in the Indian Territories is that after assaulting someone in Farewell -"

"He assaulted me!"

"How about that, a fourteen-year-old runaway running into trouble. So after assaulting someone and breaking into a motel room in Farewell, you came to Orange Rock and destroyed someone's car."

"They were assholes! I was minding my own business and they -"

"They what? Teased you? Made fun of the white girl?" Tsotsie turned a narrow gaze on her. "You seem very familiar with 'Muggle' tools and culture. Did you grow up with non-magical people?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been picked on by Muggles back home?"

Alexandra opened her mouth, but wasn't sure what to say.

"So, when that happens," Tsotsie went on, "do you use your wand on them? Or do you only feel entitled to do that in Indian Territory?"

Alexandra closed her mouth.

"Do you have any idea how much it costs to replace a car engine?"

Alexandra looked away.

"If it were up to me, we'd put you under an Enemy's Bane and keep you here as punishment. But Special Inquisitor Grimm wants you back. I hope she's got special plans for you." Tsotsie sounded bitter,

almost spiteful - though Alexandra wasn't sure whether it was directed at her or Diana Grimm.

"I think the Dark Convention is going to do something tonight," Alexandra said, thinking about the map in her pocket. "I think John is planning something for the full moon."

"Witches often gather and perform rituals beneath a full moon. We know how to defend against them."

"Do you know where? Because I think I know where they're planning to gather."

"Did an elf tell you this, too?"

"No." Alexandra folded her arms. The Auror obviously wasn't taking her seriously.

Something came flapping at them, a black bird that dove at the truck and swerved away just in time to avoid being flattened against the windshield.

"Alexandra!" screeched the bird, and then it was beating its wings furiously to try to keep up with them.

"Charlie!" Alexandra shouted in disbelief.

"What?" Tsotsie looked in the rear view mirror.

"Stop the truck! Stop!" Alexandra almost grabbed the wheel, before the Auror seized the front of her shirt and nearly slammed her against the passenger-side door.

"Don't you ever do that while someone is driving, you crazy girl!" he said.

She pried at his fingers. "That's my familiar!"

"What?"

"My familiar! My raven! Please - please stop!"

"You never told me you had a familiar with you."

"I - I didn't. I left both my familiars back in Larkin Mills. I have no idea how Charlie got here, but it's Charlie, I know it is. Please, you wouldn't force me to leave my familiar behind, would you?" Charlie was still flying after them, but a raven could not keep up with a vehicle on a highway, even if it wasn't the Automagicka.

"You just said you did leave your familiar behind." But Tsotsie put his foot on the brake and pulled over to the side of the road. He drew his wand. "Stay in the truck."

"It's just my familiar!" Alexandra said.

"I don't care what you think - ravens are deceitful creatures, and that may not be your familiar. *Stay in the truck!*" He snapped the last order out as Alexandra was about to open the door. He pointed his wand at her. She took her hand off the latch.

"Please don't hurt Charlie," she begged, so earnestly that the hardness around his eyes softened, just for a moment. He stepped out of the truck, and Alexandra watched fearfully as the Navajo faced the raven, who flew in a circle around them.

"Alexandra! Alexandra!" Charlie called, and it was all Alexandra could do not to open the door and jump out. It was Charlie - she could feel it.

"I'll be damned," Tsotsie said, after chanting a few words quietly under his breath. "Well, it's a raven all right."

Alexandra didn't wait; she opened the door, ignored the Auror's scowl of annoyance, and stepped onto the shoulder of the road. "Charlie!"

The raven landed on her outstretched arms, but pecked her as she tried to pull her familiar closer to her. "Wicked! Wicked! Wicked!"

"Missed you terrible," Alexandra said.

"Big fat jerk!" Charlie took off and circled her again, cawing angrily.

"Talkative bird," Tsotsie said.

Alexandra knew Charlie would be angry at being left in Larkin Mills. She had assumed that her mother (*Claudia!* she corrected herself angrily) would at least feed and water her pets, not simply let them

outside. She'd felt guilty every time she'd thought of them. That Charlie could find her, even in New Mexico, didn't surprise her that much, but she was mystified by the bird's agitation. It wasn't just the resentment she had expected. Charlie was disturbed by something. It was almost as if the raven was trying to warn them -

"Something is wrong," she said.

"Wicked!" Charlie said, and landed on the hood of the truck and cawed. "Fly, fly!"

"Get in the truck," Tsotsie said. "I don't like ravens. If it's coming along, you'd better silence it."

"Ravens are wise birds," Alexandra said. "I think Charlie is trying to warn us about something."

"Fly, fly!" Charlie said.

To her surprise, the Auror didn't scoff at her or order her into the truck again. Instead, he studied Charlie, then reached for his leather pouch. He turned it upside down, and Charlie screeched and took off as the large rattlesnake slid out onto the metal hood, coiled, raised its head to taste the air with its tongue, and then began shaking its tail.

Tsotsie looked down the road in the direction the snake was flicking its tongue. Alexandra could see only more highway and endless desert, and mountains on the horizon.

"Something is wrong," Tsotsie said.

"Duh," Alexandra said. "How come you believe your snake but not my raven?"

Tsotsie eyed her. "You don't know the kind of magic I'm using, and you sure don't know how to talk to snakes."

"How do you know? Maybe I can talk to snakes." Alexandra had taken a few steps back, because she didn't like being within striking range of an agitated rattlesnake, but she watched it with interest. "You have a link with it, just like I have a link with my familiars -"

"It's not a familiar," Tsotsie said.

"Whatever."

Tsotsie grabbed the snake as if unconcerned that it might strike, but Alexandra noticed that he grabbed it behind its head before pushing it back into his leather pouch.

"Get in the truck," he said. "Now."

She got in, and pleaded with Charlie: "Come on, Charlie."

She was worried Charlie might not come, either for fear of the snake or anger at her, but the raven landed in her lap and pecked at her arm. "Wicked, wicked!"

She slammed the door shut before Charlie could take off again, and to her surprise, Tsotsie jerked on the wheel and kicked dirt up as he swung the truck around to point back the way they'd come.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Do you know how to cast a Silencing Charm?" He floored the accelerator, throwing her back against the seat. Charlie's flapping wings buffeted her face.

"Quiet, Charlie," she murmured, holding the raven against her despite the bird's protests.

Tsotsie slammed on the brakes again, almost sending Alexandra pitching into the dashboard. She still hadn't fastened her seat belt.

Someone was standing in the road ahead of them. Two, then three more people materialized out of the air. One was a woman, the others were men. All of them were Navajos, dressed in rugged outdoor wear: coats and jackets, hats and headbands, boots and leather shoes. Except for one man. He was bare-chested except for a silver necklace beneath a brown cloak of animal pelts. He wore leggings, deer-hide wrapped around his calves and tied in place with bandanas, and moccasins. Standing among the other Indians who were dressed more modernly and practically, he seemed completely out of place, but the cold didn't seem to bother him.

"Alexandra Quick," the bare-chested man said, grinning with feral delight. "It *is* you!"

Alexandra's blood ran hot and cold. "John."

"Wicked!" Charlie cried.

"Stay in the truck," Tsotsie said.

"What are you going to do?" Alexandra saw that all of the Indians were holding wands, and wished desperately that she had her own.

"Stay," he repeated, in a tone one might use to order a dog. Alexandra bristled and held Charlie close to her while the Auror got out of the truck and faced the group.

"Have you all taken up the Witchery Way?" he asked. "You've joined this 'ǫnt'ijhnii?" He gestured with contempt at John.

"You call any magic your grandfather didn't teach you Witchery," John said.

"Is this the witch who's been cursing people all over the reservation?" one of the men asked, pointing at Alexandra.

"No," Tsotsie said. "She's just a white girl who wandered off her own reservation."

"Why are you protecting this *belagana*?" the woman in the group demanded. She wore pants and a cotton shirt beneath a long duster, and she held her wand in a gloved hand. There were streaks of silver in her long black hair and she might have seemed grandmotherly except for her vicious expression.

An argument in Navajo commenced. Alexandra couldn't understand any of it, except that she was obviously the topic being debated, and while Henry Tsotsie tried to reason with the yelling group, John Manuelito said nothing, merely folded his arms and regarded them all with a look of smug satisfaction.

She glared at him, wishing she had her wand. He gave her a slow wink.

Charlie flapped and beat wings against her face again, shrieking, "Wicked! Wicked!"

"I know, Charlie," she said.

Charlie pecked her ear, and when she yelped, the raven pecked the little glass window looking out the back of the truck's cab. She

turned, and what she saw made her grow cold. A gray, yellow-eyed coyote and two black owls were sitting on either side of the road behind them. The coyote crouched low, and began padding toward the truck.

Alexandra slid across the seat to the driver's side.

"Hand her over!" shouted one of the men in English. "Let us put an end to the evil she's responsible for!"

"She's not responsible for any evil," Tsotsie said.

John spoke up for the first time since the argument began. "Don't you get tired of protecting white people and following their rules?" He said this with the smirk of someone standing at the edge of a fire and poking it with a stick.

"This is the *boy* who went to the white man's school and brought the white man's evil back to us," Tsotsie replied. "All of you are letting this two-heart poison your minds. He's the one performing Witchery Way ceremonies - stop listening to his voice whispering in your ears and listen to the truth!" Then he switched back to Navajo, but when Alexandra stepped out of the truck, he hissed at her: "I told you to stay in the truck!"

"Behind us," she said.

"Do you think I didn't notice?" He grabbed her roughly and started to shove her back into the truck, but at that moment, one of the men on the road raised his wand. The Auror blocked the black bolt that shot from the other man's wand, but the silver-and-black-haired woman whipped her wand in a circle, and all four tires of the truck burst. One of the other men cast a Levitation Spell that flipped the truck onto its side. Tsotsie bellowed, "*Protego Totalus!*" and hexes and curses rebounded off his golden shield and struck the road, melting holes in the asphalt or shattering into black beads.

Charlie flew out of the half-open door that was now facing the sky. The owls that had been sitting by the roadside snapped alert. One spread its dark, mottled wings and rose into the air after the raven.

"Give me my wand!" Alexandra said to Tsotsie, as he kept a hand around her arm while countering the spells the mob was casting at them. John remained standing where he was, but the others were

circling around them, and Alexandra could see the Auror couldn't deflect attacks from all directions.

"Not a chance," Tsotsie said. The coyote had almost reached the truck before the vehicle flipped over, and it was now crouching to spring at them. Tsotsie uttered something in Navajo while pointing his wand, and the coyote yelped and rolled to the ground pawing at its mouth, which was suddenly full of fizzy green foam. One of the men threw a Stunner at Tsotsie, having edged around his Shield Spell, and the Auror deflected it back at him, but the man jumped aside. John was raising his arms.

Alexandra pleaded with Tsotsie: "I know how to duel. Don't leave me helpless while they're trying to kill me! At least let me Shield myself so you don't have to!" She watched in agony as the owl continued ascending in pursuit of Charlie, talons extended.

Tsotsie threw both of them to the ground as one of the men conjured a swarm of bees. The air vibrated as they hummed overhead. Tsotsie thrust his arm straight into their midst and rotated it, and a whirlwind roared around them, lifting their hair and blowing the bees in all directions. He rolled off of Alexandra and reached into his jacket with a grimace.

"Protect yourself only," he said. "These people have been witched." His fist emerged from his coat clenching her wand, and he pressed it against her chest and thrust her to the ground with a thump. He fixed his eyes on hers for just a moment, even as he made two of the Indian wizards duck a spell from his own wand. "Hurt them, and I swear I will see that you never do magic again."

Pinned to the ground with the Navajo Auror leaning over her, Alexandra nodded.

He relaxed his grip, and she snatched her wand from his hand even as he rose and spoke something that sounded like a cough. Hot red clouds billowed out of his wand and engulfed the nearest man, who covered his face with a sleeve and began sneezing and choking.

The earth shook, but Alexandra staggered to her feet anyway, pointed her wand skyward, and said, "*Barak!*"

It wasn't a dueling spell, but one her brother had taught her. Lightning flashed from her wand, and her arm was momentarily

ablaze. Throwing real lightning was dangerous, and Alexandra hadn't mastered it. But the owl fell from the sky trailing smoke. Alexandra winced when it turned into a man just before hitting the ground.

Two yards away, the coyote had regained its feet and crouched, growling at her. She pointed her wand, with smoke still rising from her sleeve.

"Run," she said. The 'thud' of the other shapeshifter hitting the ground echoed in her ears, and her arm hurt as if she had been the one hit by lightning, but her voice didn't quaver and her expression was flat and cold.

The coyote's ears flattened and with a whimper, it fled, tail between its legs. Alexandra felt relief and a small sense of victory before the ground buckled beneath her and rose up, throwing her off her feet and almost throwing the truck on top of her. The highway was rippling as if a great wave were passing beneath it, and then something rose out of the ground on the other side of the road - a massive head, arrow-shaped and blunt-nosed like a great serpent, but made of rock. Stone fangs hung from the roof of its mouth like stalactites, each the length of Alexandra's leg.

Lying on her back, she stared up at it and wondered if a lightning bolt would have any effect whatsoever. She thought of Shattering Spells, Severing Charms, even *Caedarus*, and was sure none would be sufficient. This sort of magic needed to be undone directly, and all she knew how to undo were minor curses and jinxes. Whatever spell John Manuelito had cast over the other people attacking them seemed to have been broken by the stone serpent's appearance; they, too, were fleeing. She saw Charlie wheeling in the sky.

She cast a Shield Charm. Henry Tsotsie did the same. She sprang to her feet and leaped as the snake struck. The Shield Charms deflected it by an arm's length, and that plus the Seven-League Boots carried Alexandra out of its path before it bit a car-sized chunk out of the road. She almost knocked the Auror off his feet as she sailed into him and rebounded, but she was the one knocked flat on her back. He gave her an odd look, then began chanting as he held up his leather pouch.

Kind of an uneven match, she thought dizzily, as the rattlesnake fell from Tsotsie's pouch to the ground. But as Tsotsie continued

chanting, the rattlesnake swelled in size. As the stone serpent slithered sideways, tearing up the road beneath it, the real serpent became the size of a python, then larger than the largest python that ever lived, and then by the time the stone snake had raised its head high above the highway to strike again, the rattlesnake was nearly as large as it was. The two snakes crashed together, their coils wrapping around one another, and the massive rattle of Tsotsie's snake swept them both off the highway just before the stone tail of the other snake smashed into the asphalt.

Alexandra coughed and rolled onto her side. Tsotsie was pointing his wand at her and for a moment she thought he was about to hex her. Then he said "*Petrificus Totalus*," and a man crashed to the ground at her feet, holding a knife in one hand and a wand in the other. He looked incompletely transformed, with his head rounded and squat on his shoulders, his neck non-existent and still sprouting downy black owl-feathers, and his hands twisted into gnarled claws. Alexandra stood up and saw John Manuelito watching them from across the highway. The other people who'd come with him - except for the shapeshifters - were stunned or unconscious on the ground. Alexandra cast darts and fireballs at John, but he Apparated out of the way, and when he reappeared, he was even further away. She looked over her shoulder - the giant snakes were still thrashing about in a death-lock and she had no idea which one was winning.

Henry Tsotsie got to his feet. "You're a coward!" he yelled at the younger Navajo. "A black, two-hearted coward! You brought contagion and sickness to Din^étah!" He added something in Navajo which made Alexandra think of the times she'd heard Anna curse in Chinese.

John laughed. "Wolves and sheep, Henry Tsotsie. Everyone is one or the other. You rolled over for the *belagana* wolves like all the other Din^é who lick Colonial boots."

Tsotsie growled. "What do your friends call themselves - the 'Dark Convention'? Tell me about rolling over for *belagana* wolves, John Manuelito. You're not even a proper '^ént'ijhnii - you have to use white man's magic for your witchcraft."

"Whatever works," John said. "You and your fellow Aurors can't protect the Din^é and you can't protect that little bitch." He flicked his

wand at Alexandra and laughed when she tensed, prepared to deflect a spell. "You can't even protect yourselves. You'll see."

Tsotsie threw a spell that howled and screeched through the air like a hailstorm, a windstorm, and a thunderbolt all wrapped into a single roaring column of pulsating air, and when it struck, the ground erupted and rained black ice and muddy water for yards around. Alexandra was impressed at the speed with which the Auror cast such a spell, but John Manuelito disappeared an instant before it touched the earth.

"Aren't you a dutiful Navajo?" John yelled, this time from somewhere out in the desert. Alexandra and Tsotsie both turned with their wands at the ready, but the crashing and scraping from the giant snakes' battle made it hard to tell where his voice was coming from. "Protecting a girl who's already dead!"

There was a cracking, crumbling sound. Chunks of stone rained down upon the road as the giant rattlesnake crushed its opponent in its grip. In seconds, the battle was over, and Alexandra and Tsotsie faced a snake the size of a dragon sitting coiled atop a pile of rocks, enormous tail held in the air at the height of a telephone pole, buzzing loudly enough to deafen them both.

A caw distracted it. It looked skyward, where Charlie was still circling overhead.

Henry Tsotsie stepped forward and raised both hands. He began speaking calmly in Navajo and the snake turned its attention back on him.

If that's not his familiar, he'd better be really good at transfigurations, Alexandra thought.

The snake began to shrink, and then as quickly as if it were a mirage vanishing off the highway, it was gone. The snake Tsotsie picked up off the pile of rubble and put back in his pouch seemed a tiny, insignificant thing by comparison.

Alexandra swallowed as she looked around at all the destruction - the overturned truck, the unconscious bodies, the torn and shattered highway, and the owl Animorphmagus she'd blasted out of the sky. It was that body that drew her attention as she looked at her wand and wondered what else she should have done.

Tsotsie went over to the man and knelt by him. He put a hand on the man's back, and waved his wand, chanting a spell she didn't recognize.

"You didn't kill him," he said. "But not for lack of trying." He walked back over to her, and his expression was angry. "What did I tell you?"

"You told me not to hurt the people who'd been bewitched. He was one of the witches, and I was defending myself. If he hurt my familiar, I could have been hurt." The defense sprang to her lips despite her relief at knowing she hadn't killed the man. "They were trying to kill me. Why? I haven't been cursing anyone."

"John Manuelito is the one stirring up trouble. You made a convenient scapegoat." The Auror began levitating each of the other Navajos to the side of the road and laying them side by side, except for the men who'd come in the form of owls.

Charlie landed on her shoulder. She scanned the horizon. "The coyote got away."

"I noticed that." Tsotsie sounded weary. He pointed at a spot by the truck. "Stand there, and don't move."

"What are we going to do?" she asked, without moving to the spot he indicated.

He was checking each of the unconscious people, loosening a few of their neck scarves and pouring a little water onto the lips of the woman. "I've already called my fellow Aurors. They'll be here shortly."

"How did you call them?"

"Smoke signals!" he snapped at her. "Would you just do as you're told?"

She walked slowly to the side of the truck. "John and his friends are going to do something tonight, under the full moon. Whether I'm here or not -"

"You will not be here if I have to personally ride a bus with you back to Chicago."

"Would you listen to me? I have a map of the Four Corners where they -"

He gave her such a wrathful look that she took a step back. Charlie squawked.

"I don't care if you have a map of the Lands Below," he said. "One more word and I'll take away your mouth."

There was something very sinister about the way he said that. Alexandra closed her mouth. Henry Tsotsie turned back to the injured.

"Ssh," Alexandra whispered to Charlie, as she edged closer to the truck, knelt, and looked under it. Her backpack was lying on the ground amidst all the other things that had fallen to the highway when the truck flipped. She stood quickly when Tsotsie looked at her, holding her hands behind her back trying to look innocent, and hoping it wouldn't occur to him to demand her wand back.

He appeared to be starting some sort of ritual. Alexandra watched a moment, but pushed her curiosity aside. The Auror wasn't going to listen to her, and John Manuelito was still out there, just waiting for another chance to get her.

She extended her wand toward the ground and muttered an incantation, waiting until Tsotsie's voice rose while chanting his own spell. Her backpack came sliding across the ground to her feet. She picked it up and slung it over her shoulders.

"Fly, Charlie," she whispered. The raven took off, and so did she. In moments, she was out of sight of Henry Tsotsie, fleeing across the desert in her Seven-League Boots.

The Stone Hogan

Alexandra stopped when she could run no further. She was far from the highway and halfway to the mountains. The land here was flat and hard, with little vegetation. She had run past two lonely houses and nearly run right through a flock of startled sheep. She didn't see the shepherds and didn't look back, hoping she hadn't been seen. But now it was afternoon, and there were no people or dwellings in sight. She sat down to rest her legs and catch her breath, and wished that she had packed more food somewhere along the way. At least she'd had breakfast, thanks to Henry Tsotsie.

Charlie landed on a rock next to her, equally fatigued, and she poured the remainder of her water into her cupped hand and let her familiar drink first, before she swallowed the last mouthful.

"I am in so much trouble," she said.

"Troublesome," said Charlie.

Alexandra knew what she was doing wasn't smart. She just couldn't allow herself to be sent back to Central Territory and handed over to her aunt while John Manuelito was still on the loose. No adults took her seriously, and John had threatened her again before he fled. He wasn't going to stop trying to kill her. Let the WJD throw her in prison afterward, or do whatever Henry Tsotsie wanted to do with her. At least if she led the Auror Authority to John and his fellow witches first, then the Dark Convention couldn't hurt her friends and family while coming after her.

There were no signs of pursuit. Alexandra had no idea whether Navajo wizards used brooms, but she thought as long as she didn't use her wand, it would be hard for even a wizard to find her in all this empty desert.

I just have to not use my wand until I find John Manuelito, she thought. She didn't even need to take on John herself - once she was close to him, she could just cast charms until the Diné[?]tah Trace Office noticed and sent Aurors after her. She hoped.

She unfolded the map and the bit of scorched vellum from her pocket and took her Lost Traveler's Compass out of her backpack, relieved that it was not one of the items the Indian Aurors had confiscated. Most of the useless 'gifts' the Generous Ones had given

her were gone. The compass was magical, but she didn't think it could be Traced, since brooms and her Seven-League Boots weren't. She made sure she had the compass aligned correctly with the sun and magnetic north, pointed the guiding needle in the direction of her destination, and used its dials to fix the settings as Maximilian had shown her.

The shirt Henry Tsotsie had given her was made of heavy cotton, but it wasn't as thick as the pullover and jacket she had been wearing before the fire, and the robes hardly served as more than a windbreaker. It was chilly and would get chillier after the sun went down, increasing the temptation to use a Warming Spell. Alexandra looked forward to reaching the meeting place of the Navajo witches just so she could warm herself. In the meantime, she decided that the best way to stay warm was to keep moving.

Charlie clucked in protest when she stood up. The raven had been pressed to keep up with her Seven-League Boots, and she felt guilty for tiring her familiar as well.

"Come here, bird-brain," she said, and took the bird into her arms. Charlie didn't even struggle. She pulled open the wide, loose collar of her robes and tucked Charlie underneath them, then held the raven to her body as she set off across the desert at a moderate walk, rather than resuming her magically-lengthened strides.

It was hours until sundown. After hiking a while longer, Alexandra was almost too tired to continue. The ground was becoming rougher, and she had ascended a rocky slope and come down the other side to find a small river running along its base. The sight of water reminded her how thirsty she was, and she let Charlie out from under her robes before kneeling at the water's edge to drink. Charlie also partook of the water, and even splashed around in it to wash some dust off.

Alexandra shaded her eyes and checked her map and compass again to locate the river and gauge how far she was from her goal. At the speed she could run in her boots, she decided it would take her less than twenty minutes to reach her destination.

She climbed a ways back up the rocky slope and found a depression beneath an overhanging ridge of stone - not quite a cave, but enough shelter to keep the sun and wind off her. With a weary sigh, she sat down and curled up there.

"Keep watch for me, will you, Charlie?" she asked. The raven cawed, and Alexandra closed her eyes.

The fluttering of wings woke her. Alexandra sat up and checked the position of the sun, which was more important than the actual time. It was nearly to the horizon, and the moon was already a bright, visible disc overhead.

Charlie landed next to her. There was something in the bird's beak. Alexandra reached for it, and was rather surprised that the raven allowed it. Usually Charlie was quite possessive of anything collected while out on scavenging missions, whether food or shiny things.

It was a large piece of fried bread. Alexandra sniffed it. It smelled fresh.

"Where did you steal this from, Charlie?" she asked.

"Charlie's a raven," Charlie said.

"You sure are. I'll bet you ate your fill first, didn't you? While you were supposed to be watching my back?"

The raven tilted its head, as if to reproach her for scolding the gift.

Alexandra only hesitated a moment before taking a bite of the bread. It tasted oily and heavy, but not bad. The piece Charlie had brought her was only a mouthful, and it made her stomach growl for more, but she pet the bird and said, "Thanks, Charlie."

Charlie squawked and took off, flying into the sky as if to resume aerial vigilance. Alexandra stood up, checked her compass one more time, and resumed her great leaping strides across the desert, galloping faster than any horse or antelope.

The sunset was glorious. Far to the west, orange-red clouds inflamed the horizon above the shadows cast across the desert by the distant mountains. A much closer mountain range to the north was all in shadows now, and Alexandra knew there was a valley between here and there, but her goal - the spot John Manuelito had

marked on his animal skin map - was just ahead. She had slowed her pace to a brisk walk, which in her Seven-League Boots was faster than her usual sprint. She called Charlie back to her. Though she had seen other ravens in the sky, she worried that somewhere out there were owls that weren't just owls. She also kept a sharp eye out for coyotes and other animals, but aside from some rodents, a fox, and what might have been a deer, she hadn't seen anything other than birds.

They were at a higher altitude now. There was still a desert basin before her, but junipers and piñon pines dotted the rocky landscape around her. The shrubs, trees, and outcroppings of rock cast long shadows that mottled the landscape as far as she could see. Alexandra thought she would be barely visible at any distance, unless her movement caught the eye, so she slowed down even more until she came to a downward slope flattening into that final basin before the mountains to the north. She squinted and shaded her eyes. In the fading sunlight, she saw tiny black figures moving, miles away, and what seemed to be a light in the growing shadows blanketing the desert.

"Stay close to me, Charlie." She descended the slope and ran across the desert. There really wasn't much to hide her from view other than shadows and juniper stands, but she could barely see those distant figures, so she hoped she likewise remained unnoticed.

Charlie knew when it was time to be silent and did not caw, but flapped along behind her, staying close to the ground.

She was half a mile from the gathering when she slowed abruptly and crouched behind some trees. Charlie landed on her shoulder. Alexandra wished she could fly as Charlie did, or see through Charlie's eyes, but she wouldn't have risked sending her familiar so close even if she could.

From her position, she could see a building: an old one, built round like other Navajo hogans she had seen, but made of stone, not wood or brick or mud. And there was a bus that had just parked some distance from it.

"What the hell?" she muttered. She looked at her compass: it pointed dead ahead. This was the spot. She scanned the desert all around, and the sky, and then brought her eyes back to the building.

There were people in front of it, wearing winter clothes like most of the Indians she'd seen, but there was someone wearing robes, too.

People were getting off the bus now. Alexandra counted seven. She could not be sure how many men and how many women, but there were definitely some of each. And more puzzling, a child.

"What the hell?" she repeated, mystified and disturbed.

"Alexandra," Charlie said. She didn't know if the bird was trying to reassure her, question her, or warn her.

The people from the bus filed into the hogan. The people outside the hogan began walking around it, some moving a considerable distance from it. Alexandra couldn't hear much this far away, but the wind carried their voices to her. It sounded like chanting. One of the men raised his hands and faced north, then turned to repeat the ritual while facing east, then south, then west. He held something in both hands that might have been a wand. The other figures were also making motions that resembled spell gestures.

Alexandra fingered her own wand and wondered what she should do. The people who'd gotten off the bus didn't look like wizards, though it was hard to tell here in the Indian Territories, where it appeared that wizards, for the most part, didn't dress differently than anyone else. If, as she supposed, the Dark Convention was doing something with a group of Muggles, she couldn't just stand by and watch. But she counted at least four adults outside the hogan. None of them looked like John Manuelito, though she wasn't sure at this distance.

A plume of smoke began rising from the center of the hogan. Apparently they had lit a fire inside.

Alexandra had almost resolved to start casting spells and hope for a quick response from the Din~~◆~~tah Auror Authority when all the people outside gathered in a small huddle, seemed to confer for a bit, and then three of them vanished.

Only one figure was left, and that figure walked in measured paces directly away from the hogan, nearly a quarter of a mile before stopping. The individual had walked in a direction that brought him or her closer to Alexandra's hiding spot, but off at an angle between Alexandra and the bus. Now that the figure was closer, Alexandra

could see that it was a woman with long dark hair pulled into a bun. She wore a red and yellow dress beneath a long striped shawl that draped over her shoulders and reached almost to her knees.

The sun was now a tiny bright spot burning its last on the horizon. In minutes, it would drop out of sight. The moon was already reflecting the sun's light onto the desert, but Alexandra knew it would be much harder to pick this woman out of the shadows once the sun set.

"Ssh, Charlie," Alexandra whispered, and she began to creep between the rocks and scrub, trying to get closer. What exactly she would do, and at what distance, she was not yet sure. She had the vague idea of Stunning the woman and questioning her, but knew it was more likely that she'd be seen and what would follow would be a very quick duel - and hopefully Alexandra hadn't miscalculated and failed to notice another wizard lurking in the shadows.

Charlie sat on her shoulder and made no sound. It was hard going, as Alexandra couldn't rise to her full height, and even stooping made her feel too exposed once she emerged from the brush and grass clinging to the cluster of rocks she'd been hiding in. So she had to either duck-walk, with her knees almost scraping the ground, or get down and crawl.

Rocks and sand dug into the flesh of her palms, her knees hurt, and she was growing cold. Being as cautious as possible, it felt as if she hadn't gotten much closer to the woman at all, who at least had not moved from her sentry position.

Alexandra was reconsidering her plan. If the witch was standing sentry, she must be waiting for something. Would dropping her have the effect of warning some unseen watcher? Alexandra was uncomfortably aware that she had no idea what was going on here. These had to be John Manuelito's friends - Navajo witches, up to no good. But John Manuelito was nowhere in sight. She remembered Henry Tsotsie's remonstrations. What good could Alexandra do? Knock out one witch, then summon the Aurors?

Certainly, she had to do something before they did whatever they were planning to do to the people inside the hogan.

The sun went down, and Alexandra risked rising to her feet and scurrying from juniper to juniper and throwing herself behind a long, low shelf of rock. The woman occasionally looked around, but

mostly her attention seemed focused on the hogan. There was a spark in the darkness near her face as she lit a pipe.

Alexandra was still over a hundred yards away when someone Apparated directly behind the woman.

It was a tall, dark figure draped in skins and furs. There seemed to be a mask over his face. The woman whirled, the wizard who had just Apparated pointed a wand, and Alexandra heard him say, very clearly: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

There was a green flash of light, and the woman fell to the ground.

Charlie squawked. Alexandra was frozen in shock. The dark figure looked in her direction, and she saw enormous white eyes and a painted, inhuman grin. She lay prone on the ground in deep shadow, with her head just peeking above the rocks. A human being could not have seen her, but she didn't know what sort of senses this being might possess.

The masked face remained turned in her direction for what seemed like a lifetime, and then the figure turned back toward the hogan and began walking forward.

The thought going through Alexandra's mind was: *Oh shit oh shit oh shit.*

Another figure materialized out of nothingness, a black shadow congealing out of the falling darkness, twenty yards away from the first, and the two of them converged on the hogan together.

Alexandra watched for the space of three more heartbeats. Then she was on her feet and running forward, leaving Charlie behind and covering the distance to the fallen woman in three magically-enhanced steps. She halted while a dozen paces behind the masked killer. He must have heard her, as he was already turning when she knocked him off his feet with a Stunning Charm. The second figure was faster and already had his wand raised when Alexandra turned to him. He muttered a curse which sent an inky black shadow snaking through the air toward her. She almost tried to Block it, and at the last moment conjured fire from her wand instead, fanning it at the dark coils of magic. The inkiness screamed as it burned and gave off a horrible stench, trying unsuccessfully to wrap itself around the flames to reach her. Alexandra had no time to

consider what would have happened if she'd attempted an ineffectual Blocking Jinx. She shot a Stunner at her opponent, who deflected the red beam but not the golden stream of magical hornets she unleashed next. They sank into his flesh and stung him all over, and while he cried out and frantically tried to dispel them, she fired another non-dueling-legal hex directly at his chest. It crackled and burned and knocked him flat on his back. Alexandra didn't stop to think before Stunning the man she'd Stunned already, making his unconscious body jump into the air and twitch. Then she cast a Full Body-Bind Spell on him for good measure. She did the same thing to the second wizard.

Charlie flew around her and cried, "Alexandra!"

Alexandra panted as the initial rush of adrenalin waned, but her heart continued hammering in her chest. "Keep watching, Charlie." She ran back to the fallen woman.

The middle-aged Indian woman had been holding a wand in one hand and a pipe in the other. Both lay on the ground next to her body. Her empty eyes stared up at the moon. Alexandra checked for a heartbeat or other signs of life, but she knew at a glance that the woman was dead.

She turned about in a circle, scanning the horizon in all directions. No one else Apparated out of the thickening shadows; no one came running. She watched Charlie gliding about, worrying about owls or other predators, but there was no other movement, and while Charlie was in the air the raven could see what she could not.

She turned toward the stone hogan, a quarter of a mile away. Whatever was going on was nothing like she'd assumed - though she'd assumed very little, understanding even less. But if the people inside were Muggles, they needed to be warned. She ran toward the building.

She covered the distance in seconds and skidded to a halt just before flying into the wooden door. Taking a deep breath, with her wand at the ready, she banged on it with her fist.

Startled voices stirred within.

I'm probably interrupting some sacred Indian ritual or something, she thought, but she opened the door.

The people inside were young and old, male and female. There was an old man and a woman almost as old as him, three young-to-middle-aged men, an overweight girl in her late teens, and a boy who couldn't have been older than eight. They were all Indians, all dressed in little more than thin cotton overshirts, and they sat on wooden benches around the perimeter of the hogan in postures indicating extreme discomfort. Alexandra noticed that several bore disfiguring scars - the teen girl turned away from her to hide the right side of her face, which looked as if something had *chewed* on it and it hadn't healed. The boy just looked at her in surprise, not hiding the three lines raking the width of his forehead. One of the men was missing an arm.

They all stared at her in shock and horror. The only other thing in the room was a fire pit in which low, hot flames burned.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said breathlessly, "but you all need to get out of here."

"*You* need to get out of here!" one of the men said. His brow was covered with sweat.

"Listen to me," Alexandra said. "The - the woman outside? I don't know what's going on, but - she's dead."

"Yuhzhee is dead?" Another of the men stood. He, too, was sweating profusely. "How? What happened?" Everyone looked even more horrified.

"A... witch killed her," Alexandra said. She realized belatedly that she was still holding her wand. She hoped she wouldn't have to spend a lot of time trying to differentiate between herself and a 'Navajo witch.' From the looks the Indians were giving her, it was obvious that the sudden appearance of a *belagana* girl did not inspire trust, with or without a wand.

"A witch," said the man who'd stood. He groaned and began to shudder.

"I - uh, more might come," Alexandra said. "You need to leave."

"We... can't." The man fell to his knees and whimpered.

"Young girl," said the man missing an arm, "you are the one who needs to leave. Now!"

Alexandra shook her head. "You don't understand. These people are wizards - Dark wizards! They kill people and they'll kill -" She stopped talking when the one-armed man groaned and rolled his head around. Drool spilled from his mouth and his eyes rolled back in his head. The man on the floor twisted and writhed in pain. The little boy began crying; the old woman put her arms around him and comforted him, though she was grimacing in pain herself.

"Get out of here!" The fat teenage girl screamed, showing her scars again. They were pulsing now, red and livid as if fresh.

"If Yuhzhee Redhorse is dead, who will keep us in?" asked the oldest man. He was the most composed of all of them, though he, too, was beginning to tremble and sweat.

"Keep you in?" A terrible realization pierced Alexandra's confusion and horror, as she watched the group of people before her groaning, sweating, and squirming in pain.

The man who'd fallen to the ground raised his head. His eyes had become different - animalistic - and when he forced words out, his teeth were unnaturally large and sharp.

"We came here... so we wouldn't hurt anyone," he panted. "Yuhzhee Redhorse and the other medicine men and women... keep us safe..."

"They keep everyone safe from us," the old man said. He coughed, except it wasn't a cough - it was something clawing its way out of him, like a beast within forcing itself through his skin. His forehead began collapsing.

"Please, get out of here!" the girl repeated, crying now, and then she shrieked and put her hands to her face as her jaw swelled and stretched.

Alexandra watched, stunned. "You're werewolves."

The man on the ground groaned. His groan turned into a growl. He extended a hand toward her, a hand grown hairy and adorned with long, bestial nails. His eyes were black and yellow and feral.

"Run," he snarled.

Alexandra was already backing out the door. She turned and ran.

Witches' Rock

Alexandra didn't think even werewolves could catch her in her Seven-League Boots. But as she ran, she wondered how Yuhzhee Redhorse had been planning to keep them safe. Did the medicine woman know a calming spell to soothe werewolves? Was she somehow able to keep them inside the stone hogan?

Let loose, how far would the werewolves roam? The nearest town was many miles away, but it would be a long night. And what about the isolated homesteads she had passed on her way here? There weren't many people out here in the desert, but if the lycanthropes sought out human prey, they'd find the few who were around.

Which made her think of the two Dark Wizards she'd left unconscious and paralyzed on the ground, not far from Yuhzhee Redhorse's body.

She skidded to a halt, digging her heels into the earth and spraying rocks and dirt. Overhead, Charlie cawed.

From behind her came a long, bloodcurdling howl.

Alexandra looked to the northeast, where the valley she had seen earlier on her map was now visible, a wide river of dark black and blue sandstone in the moonlit shadows. There had been no towns on the map, and Alexandra doubted anyone lived there. It was too sparse for sheep grazing.

She turned back, and Charlie immediately flew in front of her.

"Stupid!" Charlie cawed.

"I know," Alexandra said, but she trotted back toward the hogan as more howls and snarls emanated from within. She stopped when she was far enough away that she could still turn and sprint faster than any creature could close the remaining distance.

The stone structure was certainly not going to contain the werewolves for long now. The wooden door trembled as claws scored it and bodies smashed against it from within.

Alexandra leveled her wand. Behind her, Charlie's wings flapped much too close to the ground.

She spoke in a voice of command: "Charlie, fly!"

The first werewolf came smashing through the door. It was a large, round creature with gleaming yellow eyes almost buried beneath folds of flesh. Alexandra thought it was the teenage girl. Its eyes met hers, and it snarled.

"*Stupefy!*" Alexandra shouted, putting everything she had into the spell.

The red beam struck the werewolf square between the eyes. It shrieked as it was bowled over on top of the creature behind it.

Another werewolf emerged, almost with a sense of dignity, and half-stood on its hind legs, raised its snout into the air, and sniffed.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Alexandra yelled. The werewolf jerked as the spell struck it, then toppled over.

The large, plump werewolf was picking itself up off the ground, shaking its head woozily. One eye was fluttering; the other was wide open, glaring in Alexandra's direction.

The other five werewolves came clawing and scratching their way over the dazed one, and paused for just an instant as they faced the girl standing a hundred feet away. Their eyes were hot and yellow, jaws slavering. Then the smallest one - it looked like a cub, though it was the size of a German Shepherd - began charging toward her, baying hoarsely. The others followed. The one Alexandra had tried to immobilize with a Full Body-Bind Spell was rolling over.

"Fly, Charlie!" she repeated, and then she was running off across the desert with the werewolves on her heels.

It would be really nice if the Aurors would show up about now, she thought.

No one did. Alexandra kept running. The wolves loped after her, snarling and howling their fury, but with her Seven-League Boots she outdistanced them until they were almost lost in the gloom behind her. When she had a suitable lead, she turned and sent a swarm of golden hornets streaming through the air into the darkness. She heard yelps and snarls when the hornets reached the pursuing pack.

Charlie caught up to her, cawing a warning.

Alexandra had succeeded in drawing the lycanthropes' undivided attention. Now she just had to stay ahead of them until morning.

She ran on, approaching the valley. She could not run all night. Her mind was scrambling for a plan. If she led the werewolves into the valley, maybe they would stay there. She could let them chase her for a while before ditching them by fleeing up the far slope. Maybe at some point during her game of playing the rabbit for werewolves, she'd find a spell that could actually slow them down.

The descent to the valley floor seemed gradual from a distance, but when she came to a bluff above the valley, it sloped down at a steeper incline than she'd assumed - steep enough to make running headlong downhill perilous.

A few miles away was a towering rock formation, standing alone in advance of the mountains behind it like a stone sentinel positioned before the main army. It wasn't as impressive as Orange Rock - not as high, nor as massive - but its tall, black spires gave it an eerie, sinister appearance. The full moon seemed to be shining directly down upon it, and Alexandra could see a flat terrace halfway up, well below the highest point of the rocky spires. It was much too high to reach by scaling the vertical rock face. In short, it looked like the perfect place to take refuge if one wanted to put oneself out of reach of werewolves. If she could reach it.

She looked over her shoulder. The lycanthropes had come into view again, snarling eagerly as they caught sight of her.

Miles to go - one long sprint - and then, hopefully, rest and safety.

"Let's go, Charlie." Alexandra grinned encouragingly, and was about to begin descending the slope at a fast but not breakneck pace when her grin froze on her face. She had caught sight of something else on the valley floor: moonlight reflecting off of metal.

There was, she could see now, a road running along the desert valley. Not much more than a narrow band of bare dirt, ghostly silver in the moonlight, but there was a truck sitting right there in the middle of it, between her and the tall rock formation.

It has to be abandoned, she thought. She took one step and then another down the slope. *There can't be any people around*.

She waved her wand to fling rocks behind her as she ran. She didn't aim them, just levitated the largest ones she could see and sent them flying. She took longer steps, sailing down the slope and keeping her footing only thanks to the magic of the Seven-League Boots. Her speed was great enough to make her worry about the abrupt deceleration at the bottom, but she had to put as much distance as she could between herself and the werewolves.

Charlie seemed to know where Alexandra was going. The raven began gliding toward the distant rock spires.

A final bounding leap carried Alexandra to level ground. She winced as the shock of landing ran from her ankles to her teeth, but she didn't waste time catching her breath. Instead, she sprinted ahead, the wind howling in her ears louder than the werewolves, deafening her to Charlie's cries.

She reached the truck in a minute. She hoped she would find it was an abandoned, rusted hulk. It wasn't. It was dusty and dirty, but there was a fresh license plate and enough paint to tell her it hadn't been sitting there for long.

Maybe someone had decided to go hunting, though Alexandra had no idea what you could hunt out here at night. She felt a desperate hopelessness. There was no way she could find someone wandering out there in the desert before the werewolves did. Then she noticed that the truck's windows were fogged.

She ran to the driver's side and looked in. Though the windows were steamed up, there were definitely figures inside. She rapped on the window loudly. "Hey! Open up!"

Startled voices, squeals, and curses came from within, accompanied by the sounds of frantic motion.

Someone sat up and rolled down the window, and Alexandra was no less surprised than the boy who stared back at her: it was the ringleader of the teens at the Orange Rock Library.

He could only gape in open-mouthed astonishment at the sudden appearance of this white-haired girl in the middle of the desert, miles

and miles from the nearest town. He was flushed and sweaty and his clothes were in disarray, but not as much as those of the girl in the cab with him - another one of the teenagers from the library.

"Start the truck," Alexandra said. "We have to get out of here now!"

"W-what?" the boy stammered.

"Start the truck!" she shouted.

He became annoyed. "Okay, look -"

Some distance away - but not nearly far enough - wolves howled. The girl sucked in a quick, startled breath.

"Those are werewolves," Alexandra said. "*Real* werewolves. And they're coming this way."

The girl let out a little shriek. "Oh my God!"

The boy glanced in the direction of the howls and said, "Werewolves aren't real."

Alexandra pointed her wand at a stunted juniper a few yards away and said, "*Incanderus!*" Flames shot from her wand and set the juniper on fire.

"Jesus!" exclaimed the boy, then he flinched when Alexandra pointed the wand at him.

"I'm a witch," she said, "and if you don't start the truck right now, I'll turn you into a beetle." She flicked her wand and conjured a beetle, which buzzed about and made him flinch again before it flew off into the night.

"I - I - I can't!" the boy gibbered. "It won't start!"

"What?" the girl next to him exclaimed. "You mean you really *did* run out of gas? You idiot!"

"No!" he said. "It's just the battery... it dies sometimes in cold weather, but I was gonna get it replaced. My Uncle Nashi will find us tomorrow morning. He always drives this way just after sun-up, he lives over by -"

"You planned to stay out here in the desert all night with a dead battery?" the girl demanded. "What if your uncle didn't come by?"

"Your Uncle Nashi is going to find your bodies," Alexandra said.

"Usually it just needs a jump start!" The boy was terrified now as the baying of the pack came much closer.

"Alexandra! Alexandra!" shrieked Charlie from above. The teenagers in the truck both shivered and looked skyward.

Alexandra moved to the front of the truck. "Open the hood. Show me where the battery is."

The boy got out, moving slowly, in a bit of a daze.

"Just so you know, I can outrun them," Alexandra said. "So don't hurry on my account."

He moved more quickly, raising the hood and pointing. Alexandra wished Archie had taught her something about car engines, though she knew that was unfair; she'd shown no interest in them before. "So if it gets charged with electricity, it will start?"

"Well, yeah, kind of." The boy gulped as a howl came from less than a mile away, and then he almost grabbed Alexandra when Charlie called to her again. "You attach jumper cables and, uh... I have to be trying to start the engine while -"

"Okay, get in and try to start it," Alexandra said.

"You're kidding."

Much louder howls echoed across the valley.

"Werewolves," Alexandra repeated.

The boy ran back to the cab and got behind the wheel. The girl was looking at Alexandra through the windshield, eyes wide in the darkness, and Alexandra could hear her crying. Alexandra pointed her wand at the battery. She had no time even to think of a doggerel verse, but she could throw lightning from her wand. She knew the theory behind summoning lightning in a more controlled manner. The theory was complicated; fancy tricks involved lots of Arithmancy and lots more practice.

The boy turned the key in the ignition, and the truck engine made a horrible grinding sound. Alexandra whispered words that were as much prayer as incantation, and electricity flashed from her wand and flickered over the engine. The entire truck jerked and spasmed, and then the engine caught and started. So did a fire. Alexandra hastily cast an Extinguishing Charm to put out the flames and slammed the hood shut. She ran past the driver's window and vaulted into the back of the truck.

"Drive!" she shouted.

Wolves howled. Alexandra saw dark furry bodies dashing across the desert toward them. She pointed her wand and conjured wind to hurl sand and rocks at them, though all it would do was sting their eyes and perhaps blind them for a second or two.

The wheels of the truck screeched as the boy floored the accelerator, and Alexandra was thrown face-first into the truck bed as it took off. She rose to her hands and knees and hurled Stunners, hexes, a stinking black cloud, and more golden hornet swarms back the way they'd come. The truck bounced violently, almost throwing her out several times, but she just kept shouting, "Drive! Drive! Faster!"

They left the werewolves behind. They weren't going as fast as Alexandra in her Seven-League Boots, but they were going fast enough to come to a messy end if the driver lost control of the vehicle.

Alexandra smelled something burning before she felt the truck start to shake. She looked over her shoulder. Smoke was spilling out from under the truck's hood. The girl in the front was screaming: "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!"

Alexandra yelled, "Keep going!"

The truck continued bouncing and jerking along over the desert, but she could feel the engine giving out. They were racing along what passed for a road; up close, it was barely visible at all. On their left was the tall, black rock formation to which she had originally planned to flee. She wasn't sure if the truck could make it that far, but if they stalled here in the open, they were certainly all dead. Or at least, the two Navajo teenagers were. And what could she do - run away and leave them to their fate?

"Why don't you Trace me now?" she shouted angrily, hurling a bolt of lightning that crackled and spit her anger up at the sky. It also made the girl in the passenger's seat scream in terror. It did not, however, bring any Aurors to the rescue.

Alexandra scrambled around to grasp the edge of the truck bed and lean forward so she could shout at the boy behind the wheel: "Drive to that rock! As fast as you can!" She pointed at the tall column of rock, which looked even darker and spookier from here on the valley floor.

"That's Witches' Rock!" the boy said.

"It's our only chance!"

"It's haunted! There are ghosts and witches up there -"

"Now you believe in ghosts and witches?"

His eyes rolled in her direction, showing their whites. "Well, I didn't believe in werewolves either!"

The girl covered her face and cried in terror.

"How much further will this truck take us?" Alexandra asked. "If it dies out here in the middle of the desert, I'll jump on my broom and fly away." She held her wand in a clenched fist outside his rolled-down window. "Now head for Witches' Rock!"

He gulped and turned the wheel. They swerved off the poor excuse for a road and immediately went over a rock that almost threw Alexandra out of the truck. There was no way she could stay in the truck bed while the vehicle bounced across the uneven rocky terrain, trailing smoke from its hood. She took a deep breath, swung her legs over the side, and dropped, trying to run as she hit the ground. She stumbled and almost spun about completely, but the magic of the boots kept her on her feet, though with ankles that felt as if they'd just been put into a vice. She turned about and ran after the truck, shouting at the boy to keep going - he'd started to slow down when he saw her fall out.

He stared at her in wonder as she ran alongside the truck, which was doing almost thirty miles an hour even off-road.

"Keep going until you reach the rock!" she shouted. "Don't stop if you want to live! I'll catch up to you!" Then she stopped running, bent over, put her hands on her knees, and took long, deep breaths.

Charlie landed on her shoulder and screeched in her ear: "Wicked!"

Wolves howled. They came bounding over the horizon beneath the full moon. Alexandra had hoped she might have slowed them down with her spells. It seemed more likely she'd only pissed them off even more. She looked over her shoulder and saw the taillights of the truck receding toward the rocky spire. Smoke billowed out of the engine. She wondered if the driver could see at all.

She stood up. The werewolves were tearing down the road toward her. They seemed tireless.

"Come on then," she said, and she hurled a fireball at them. The lycanthropes scattered, and she screamed a curse that filled the air with sharp thorns, bouncing off rocks and embedding in the werewolves' fur. They cried, yipped, and howled in anger, then snarled with the fury of a hundred rabid wolves and surged toward her again.

She ran across the desert, away from the towering rock where she'd sent the truck, toward the far side of the valley, with the werewolves baying and howling at her heels.

Her Seven-League Boots carried her to the far slope in minutes. She turned and sent up flares and sparks from her wand, just to make sure the werewolves knew where she was - and to help any Aurors who might be in the valley find her as well, though she held out little hope of that.

She'd left Charlie behind, so she was alone for a few moments. She spent the time resting, preparing herself for the next leg of the chase. Her feet hurt terribly, and her legs were more tired than they'd been after Ms. Shirliffe's most brutal work-outs. She shifted the pack on her shoulders; the straps were beginning to cut into her flesh. And she was cold, though she'd hardly noticed while running and sitting in the back of the truck. She wasn't dressed for the desert night in winter. She ran a hand over her face. A magic potion to banish fatigue would be nice right now. Or just a glass of water.

While I'm wishing, how about a spell that will actually stop a werewolf?

The lupines loped into sight. They must have been getting tired also; they weren't running at the frantic pace they had been earlier. Their eyes brightened and they dashed forward when they saw her, growling with inhuman sounds.

"*Levicorpus!*" Alexandra said, and the lead werewolf yowled as it flipped and floated upward, pawing helplessly in the air. She hit another one with a blistering acid hex. She felt guilty as the creature pawed at its nose - she thought it was the old woman - but she didn't hesitate before casting a Deadweight Spell on the smallest werewolf, the one who had been a little boy. He yipped and continued dragging his oversized paws toward her, but at least it slowed him down.

The others were closing too fast. Alexandra took a breath and a running leap, and sailed over their heads. Even the lycanthropes looked amazed as she leaped higher and farther than any human being should be able to. She spun and cast another Deadweight Spell, this time on the werewolf who'd been bringing up the rear, hobbling along on three legs, though still fast enough to overtake a fleeing girl who wasn't wearing Seven-League Boots. The beast snarled and turned toward her, but she ran away before any of them could close the distance again.

Once again she left them behind, this time running in a straight line across the valley, toward Witches' Rock.

She found the truck a hundred yards from the rock formation, with the teens huddled in the cab. The boy had his arms around his girlfriend. Oil and rubber were still smoking beneath the hood.

They both jumped when Alexandra banged her fist on the window and shouted, "What are you doing?"

The boy opened the driver's side door, and spoke with infuriating calmness. "The engine's dead."

"Get out! Run for that big rock tower, now!"

They both stared at her, wide-eyed with terror.

"You want us to g-go to Witches' Rock?" the girl asked. Then she screamed and put her hands to her ears when a chorus of unearthly howls reached them.

"Do you understand that those are *werewolves*?" Alexandra shouted. "Stay here like idiots, or take your chances with me." When they continued staring at her, she added angrily, "I don't even have to save you!"

Charlie came swooping out of the sky. She made a quick gesture with her free hand, and pointed. "The rock, Charlie! We're going there!" The raven cawed and rose into the air again, flapping toward Witches' Rock.

"You talk to ravens," the boy said.

"And I'm a witch." Alexandra brandished her wand. "Now start running."

He ran, trying to help the girl along. Neither of them ran very fast. Alexandra wanted to give them a hotfoot or a Stinging Hex to their behinds to encourage them to move faster, but she gritted her teeth and followed them with easy paces, checking over her shoulder and trying to guess how long it would take for the werewolves to catch up to them. At least she knew the lycanthropes were getting tired too.

Up close, the immense column of rock was not black at all, but orange and red like the rest of the landscape. It was still a formidable, spooky presence. Though just a small spur compared to the mountains behind it, it rose at least a thousand feet above the desert. Alexandra realized that the shelf she'd been planning to use as a refuge was much higher than she'd thought looking at it from above.

The bloodcurdling howls were closer now. The two older teenagers trembled.

"What are you going to do?" the boy asked. He held the girl, whose face was buried in his chest.

Alexandra unslung her pack and pulled out the Skyhook. High above their heads was a crack in the sheer rock face, not a shelf or even a

proper recess, but a couple of people might be able to perch there, at least for a little while. It was well below the much loftier height she wanted to reach, but she thought it was just within reach of her throwing range. She began whirling the Skyhook around at the end of its rope, and then, with all her strength, she hurled it into the air. Just as it reached the apex of her throw, and an instant before it began to fall back to the earth, she tugged the rope and hooked the Skyhook in the air.

The boy looked up, squinting. Alexandra told him, "Climb."

"You sure it's anchored up there?"

She made green flames ripple around her wand. "Stop arguing with me!"

The girl began moaning something in Navajo. He shook her. "Come on, Trish. Climb up the rope."

"I can't climb a rope!" she sobbed.

"You go first," Alexandra said.

He opened his mouth, looked at her wand, closed it, took a deep breath, and opened it again. Alexandra knew he wanted to send his girlfriend up the rope first. She said, "You go first so you can help *her* reach the top, dumbass."

He blinked, nodded, and grabbed the rope with both hands. Alexandra cast a Featherweight Charm on him, and he gasped in surprise when he was able to pull himself up the rope as if he weighed practically nothing.

Alexandra cast the spell on the girl next. "Now you go."

"I can't!" she protested.

Alexandra slashed the air with her wand and split the earth at the girl's feet with a curse. The girl screamed and jumped away from the wisps of smoke.

"Climb up that rope or I'll steal your heart!" Alexandra shouted.

Trish shrieked and clawed her way up past Alexandra's reach before she even realized how high she'd climbed. She squealed in surprise, then kept climbing when Alexandra shot sparks from her wand.

"Hey!" the boy cried frantically from above. "It - it's not anchored to anything! It's just - hanging in mid-air!"

"Step onto that little niche up there, and help your girlfriend up," Alexandra shouted. A black shape perched on the rocks above their heads cawed. The girl screamed again, and Alexandra sighed. Then howls drowned out all other sounds, and Alexandra listened, trying to guess the distance. The werewolves weren't visible yet, but she doubted they had many minutes. She began climbing the rope.

She wished she could cast a Featherweight Charm on herself, but that violated Newton's Hidden Law. Mr. Adams said it was like picking yourself up by the seat of your pants, and that a more advanced expostulation explained why there was no such thing as a Flying Spell. So she had to pull her full weight up the rope. It was a distance she'd climbed without much difficulty in JROC exercises, but that was when she was well-rested, well-fed, and not covered with bruises. By the time she reached the Skyhook, dangling in the air, her arms were as tired as her legs. The two Navajo teenagers were squeezed into the angular gap splitting the surface of the rocky face before her, trying to force themselves back as far as they could go - which was no more than a couple of feet. Their legs dangled and Trish was taking deep breaths and trying not to go into hysterics.

Alexandra tried to join them on the ledge, and realized that it was taking all of her remaining strength just to hang onto the rope. She didn't think she could go much further. She reached a hand out, clinging to the rope with her other hand, and said, "Help me over there."

The boy gave her a long look, then reached out his hand and pulled her onto what was left of the tiny lip of rock for her to stand on. Alexandra flipped the Skyhook free, and pulled up the rope.

"Now what?" the boy asked breathlessly.

"We have to go higher." Alexandra could just barely keep her balance where she stood. "Hold onto me while I throw the hook up again."

"You mean we have to climb higher?" the girl cried.

Alexandra looked across the desert. From their vantage point, the truck was a metallic shell sitting in the moonlight like a smoking beetle, and wolfen forms were closing on it, their eyes gleaming brightly. Already, their snarls were audible.

"We can't sit here all night," she said. *And I don't know how high werewolves can jump.* But her arm trembled as she lifted the Skyhook.

"Let me throw that thing," the boy said.

"No."

He grimaced. "Please don't threaten to turn me into a beetle again, but I am a man."

A boy, she thought. "So?"

"I'm on the varsity baseball team. Look, you're what, thirteen?"

"Almost fifteen."

"I can throw farther than you."

Alexandra forced down her automatic impulse to argue. The Indian boy was bigger than her, more muscular, and he hadn't been running around all day and all night. She clenched her jaw. "There's a trick to making it hook - I don't have time to teach you." She handed the Skyhook to him, then took hold of the rope below his clenched fist and held it loosely. "Once you throw it, let go."

It was awkward and precarious. Alexandra had to lean back against the rock and hold onto his sleeve while he leaned outward in order to give himself room to swing the Skyhook. They persuaded Trish to hold onto his knees. Only because of the Featherweight Charm was Alexandra confident of keeping him from toppling over the side. He swung the hook in a circle, making a fierce hum, and then hurled it with all his strength. The rope slid through Alexandra's hand, and she felt for the tell-tale moment just before it started to go slack and yanked it against the air above. It hooked. The boy looked upward. "How the heck does it do that?"

"Magic." They heard snarls and a crash from the desert below. The werewolves had flipped the truck over and were tearing it apart. "Time to start climbing."

While the older girl wept at Alexandra's feet, the boy climbed, still with feather-lightness thanks to Alexandra's spell. He scrambled up the rope and said, "There's another ledge here - it's pretty narrow."

"I can't," Trish sobbed. "I can't climb again." She cringed as Alexandra leaned over her. "Please, don't use witchcraft on me!"

"I won't," Alexandra said. "But the spell that makes you so light will wear off, and then you won't be able to sit here, and you'll fall down there."

As if to underscore her point, the wolves came charging at the vertical rock surface, and with a running start, the largest of them hurled itself up the rock, claws digging into the tiny fissures below the larger crack where the two girls were poised. For a few seconds it actually clung to the rock and snarled at them. Its face was pure bestial rage; it gnashed its teeth as if already tasting their flesh.

Alexandra pointed her wand and sent a green ball of light practically flying down the werewolf's throat. It tumbled to the ground with an impact that would have broken the back of a normal person or wolf. She didn't have a second to worry - the lycanthrope shook itself off and rose to its feet, while the other six began also trying to claw their way up to them. Alexandra became aware belatedly that the girl next to her was screaming incoherently.

"Climb," Alexandra told her. "Then we'll be safe. I promise."

Trish sniffled, wiped her nose, and took the rope in her hands. She was shaking so badly Alexandra worried she wouldn't be able to climb even with a Featherweight Charm on her, but the sight of more werewolves snarling and howling only yards below her feet gave her motivation, as did her boyfriend calling to her.

Alexandra took the time to cast Deadweight and Full Body-Bind Spells on each werewolf in turn. It didn't immobilize any of them - even the cub was still thrashing about - but it took some of the spring out of their leaps. Then she climbed up the rope. It was harder the second time, and she had to pull herself up one body-length at a time like an inchworm. Charlie began circling around her,

calling her name. When she reached the ledge the boy had mentioned, she found it was hardly a ledge at all. There wasn't enough room for her to join the two teenagers. She hung there, wondering how long she could hang on.

"Come on," the boy said. "I can hold you up."

"Not for long you can't." Alexandra swallowed, and began swinging.

He boggled at her. "What are you doing?"

"Close your eyes." The next time she reached the end of her swing, Alexandra pointed her wand and said, "*Defodio!*" and blasted a hole in the rock face two yards from the ledge where the teens stood.

"Jesus!" the boy said as stone chips showered them.

She swung back and forth like a pendulum, and enlarged the breach three more times until it was large enough for her to stand in, whereupon she kicked and spun at the end of the rope until she maneuvered herself into the niche and crouched down, catching her breath.

"Um, why don't you... use your broom?" the boy asked.

Alexandra closed her eyes. "I was lying about having a broom." What she wouldn't give to have her broom right now.

She shook the Skyhook loose and considered it. She couldn't let the boy throw it this time - she had to have her hand on the rope to make it hook. She couldn't throw it up high enough. Unless...

"Charlie," she called.

"Who's Charlie?" the boy asked, before the raven answered him with a caw. Charlie landed on the jagged lip of rock Alexandra had just created.

She cast a Featherweight Charm on the Skyhook, and it weighed no more than a pin or a paperclip. She cast the same spell on the rope.

"Charlie," she said, "I need you to carry this higher - as high as it will go."

A scornful squawk expressed the raven's opinion of that idea. The chunk of metal was much larger and normally heavier than Charlie.

Alexandra murmured:

"Charlie save us, or we'll die,

Take the Skyhook, take it high."

It wasn't really a spell. Whatever else magic could do, she didn't think she could make Charlie understand and obey her unless the raven wanted to.

She stood and began twirling the hook. It whipped through the air much faster when it weighed so little. She watched her familiar, hoping she could communicate her intent. The bird's eyes were fixed on the spinning hook, entranced.

"Please, Charlie," she whispered.

With a caw, the raven took off.

Alexandra hurled the hook into the air. It flew half the length of the rope and started to fall. Then something caught it, and with a shriek from above, the rope began sliding through Alexandra's hand.

Charlie continued flapping furiously until the rope was almost at its limit. Even with a Featherweight Charm, the Skyhook and fifty feet of rope was a lot of drag for the raven to fight against. Alexandra held her breath and gave the rope a snap, and when she could just feel it losing its tension, she yanked downward. The magic of the Skyhook did not obey the laws of physics, but it did obey the magic that had forged it and made the rope, and if things were not done properly, it would not work.

When she pulled, the Skyhook held, and she let out her breath. She said to the other two: "I'm going to toss you the end of the rope. The two of you can climb higher."

"What if there's no ledge up there?" the boy asked.

"How long can you stand where you are? Especially when you start to weigh what you should again?" She tossed him the end of the rope. It didn't come back.

"Can't you cast that... spell again?" he asked.

"Maybe. I don't know if I can keep it up all night."

Alexandra heard movement, whispering voices, sobs. The boy was at least adjusting to the situation after his initial panic, and doing his best to keep his girlfriend calm and moving. He began scrambling up the rope. After a few minutes, he said, "There's a ledge up here - not just a ledge, but a slope! Almost a path going up the rock. It's pretty steep, but I think we can go higher on foot, if we're careful."

Trish groaned. Alexandra crouched, resting her weary limbs. Charlie descended to land on her knee and make soft warbling sounds. From below, the werewolves were still frothing and snarling, but Alexandra didn't think they were any longer a threat.

"C'mon, Trish," the boy said.

"I can't, Johnny!" Trish said.

Alexandra listened to the couple argue, and finally Johnny persuaded Trish to grab the rope, hold on, and close her eyes. Having figured out that the rope and Trish were both feather-light, it wasn't hard for him to pull her up as if reeling in a fish.

Minutes later, the rope snaked down the rock face and dangled next to Alexandra. "You can climb up now," Johnny called.

"I don't think I can," Alexandra said.

"Fly, fly!" Charlie said.

"Can't do that, either, Charlie." Alexandra leaned her head back against the rock. The full moon seemed to be shining directly on her, and she thought perhaps she could just sleep here. She could perhaps use a Sticking Charm to keep her from rolling off the ledge, but what else could she do?

"Come on," Johnny said, raising his voice so it would carry down the cliff and above the snarls of the wolves. "You've been yelling at us and telling us not to quit all night."

The werewolves suddenly sent up a howling, and Alexandra waited until they were done before calling back, "Find a safe spot and stay there. I'm pretty sure someone will be along eventually. I'll be fine. I

really can't climb the rope again. I can't make myself lighter like I made you, and I'm just too tired."

Johnny thought about that a moment. Then he shouted, "Grab the rope, tie it around yourself, and hang on."

"What?"

"I'll pull you up."

"I just told you, I can't make myself lighter!"

"What do you weigh, a hundred pounds soaking wet? We can pull you up. Come on, we can't leave you down there. What if you fall?"

What if you let go? Alexandra thought. But it was very uncomfortable sitting here, and she hated feeling helpless. She took the rope and slowly curled it around her arms - all that the length that reached her would allow.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked.

"You got it? Hang on."

Her arms burned as she was pulled upward, until after a few yards she was able to let out some slack and loop it and hook one leg through it. She dangled and bumped against the rocks precariously, while Johnny exhorted Trish to hold on and keep pulling. When she could brace a foot against the rock, Alexandra helped by pushing herself upward. Below, seven pairs of yellow eyes glared at her in helpless fury, and the werewolves continued to bay and snarl. Charlie flew up and down the rock face as if supervising the task.

It seemed to take a very long time before the two Navajos pulled Alexandra over the ledge. They were still less than two hundred feet off the ground, and hundreds of feet below the flat plateau Alexandra had originally hoped to reach - a destination she now realized she could never have reached on her own. But Witches' Rock split into multiple outcroppings and formations and ridges a quarter of the way up its length, and as Johnny had said, they had reached a point where it was possible to hike to higher ground, though there was very little leeway for a slip or a tumble. Trish was still shaking and trying to wipe her tears away, so Johnny put an arm

around her, but he looked at Alexandra with something like admiration.

"You really are a witch, aren't you?" he said. "I mean, the Wizard of Oz kind, not the Navajo kind."

"Something like that," Alexandra said wearily.

"I'm, uh, sorry we gave you a hard time in the library."

"I'm sorry I sabotaged your friend's car."

Johnny's eyes widened. "You did that? Do you know how much it's going to cost Ron Pete to replace an engine?"

Alexandra just looked at him, apologetic and resentful at the same time.

He ran a hand through his hair. "So, uh, what now?"

Trish shuddered as the werewolves began howling again. They sounded further away. Alexandra cautiously approached the edge, and looked down to see that some of them were moving away from the rock.

"Oh, crap," she said. She pointed her wand and sent a cloud of needles raining down on them, followed by more glowing hornets. She aimed into their midst and said "*Barak!*" Johnny and Trish both jumped and Johnny almost lost his footing as the lightning bolt crackled from Alexandra's wand and struck the ground below. The lycanthropes scattered and then began running around the base of Witches' Rock, howling their fury.

"What the hell are you doing?" Johnny exclaimed. "Are you crazy?"

"How far away does your Uncle Nashi live?" Alexandra asked.

"Ab - bout twenty miles," Johnny stammered.

"And the nearest town?"

Johnny frowned. "Little Creek is thirty miles... Orange Rock a little over fifty."

"We've got about eight more hours of full moon," Alexandra said. "Do the math."

The Indian teenagers both turned pale.


"Let's go," Alexandra said. "From up higher, maybe I can see further."

They had to climb. It was not a trail, just a series of gaps and ledges and large cracks in the rock, and it was slow, arduous going. For the better part of an hour, Alexandra would now and then pause to listen for the sounds of the werewolves, and then she would point her wand and send a volley of loose rocks hurtling over the side to rain down on them. This seemed to have the desired effect of provoking the creatures so they remained fixated on the humans whom they could hear and smell, but not reach.

Charlie flew from one precipice to another, each time perching on a spot that the teenagers could reach without having to fly. Johnny and Trish were both awed and intimidated by the raven, and by Alexandra, but they didn't ask any more questions until they were almost at the hollow recess in the middle of Witches' Rock. Johnny shuffled to a halt and turned to Alexandra. Trish had not stopped crying. All of their hands were now cut and bleeding, and their knees and elbows battered and scraped raw.

"So, the other kind of witch," Johnny said. "They don't really exist, do they?"

"What other kind of witch?" Alexandra asked. "You mean anteenies?"

"nt'ijhnii," Johnny said. "Navajo witches. Skinwalkers and medicine men who use corpse-poison and follow the Witchery Way."

Trish abruptly began speaking to Johnny in Navajo. She clutched at him in near-hysteria. He tried speaking reassuringly to her, but the whites of her eyes were visible in the moonlight, and she wouldn't take her eyes off Alexandra as they ascended the last series of rocks they had to climb to reach the miniature summit.

"You can't really steal our hearts, can you?" Johnny asked.

Alexandra looked around, engrossed by the flat rocky surface which was almost like a giant dueling platform, surrounded by sharp spires thrusting even higher into the sky, rising to pinnacles hundreds and hundreds of feet above their heads. To the south, the desert was an endless ocean of blue and silver beneath the moonlight. To the north were mountains, brooding and black and immense enough to contain an entire Lands Below within. To the east and west were more desert - a little redder to the west, and in each direction were distant peaks of smaller mountain ranges, and here and there a solitary monolith or small mountain standing on its own within Din~~o~~tah. Alexandra looked in the direction of Orange Rock, but could not see that massive formation, probably because of all the valleys between them and the band of shadow that swallowed the horizon.

She turned back to the older kids, who had not moved.

"You think I did all this to lure you up here to steal your hearts?" she said. "I'm not even an Indian - how can I be an ansheesh-chee?"

"Any stranger can be a witch," Johnny said.

"Well, if you're afraid to stay here with me, feel free to take a flying leap." It had been cold down on the ground, and it was even colder up here, with the wind blowing unobstructed amidst the pillars of stone and making a wailing sound. Alexandra's thin clothing gave her little protection, and she was shivering, tired, and feeling a little resentful at being given the evil eye by a couple of Muggles she'd just saved from being eaten by werewolves.

Johnny pulled Trish to the other side of the level rock and sat down with her. They kept their eyes on Alexandra, and Johnny spoke soothingly to the other girl. Alexandra watched them for a moment, thinking that Johnny was kind of a nice guy for a jerk. She wished someone would let her sit down and just tell her it would be all right. She walked to the edge and looked down. She couldn't see the werewolves.

"Crap." She leaned against a rock, and muttered incantations that produced a cascade of fire, burning ribbons of light, and howling pinwheels that sparked and bit the air. Rocks and sand flew and plants burned where they struck the ground, but the next wolfish howl that disturbed the night came from too far away for the howler to be seen.

"Crap," she said again. She looked up at the moon, and hoped the werewolves would not get too far before it set. Orange Rock? Probably not. Little Creek? Only if they made a beeline for it. Johnny's Uncle Nashi? She didn't know. How could she know who else might be driving, camping, hiking, or living in a remote hogan far from the nearest community? She slid to the ground and wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. Charlie hopped across the stone to her. She flicked her wand and cast a Warming Charm on the rock she was sitting on and the rock she was leaning against, and let Charlie hop into her lap.

She didn't know what woke her up, but her eyes were already open when two figures materialized out of the air, like smoke congealing out of nothing. A pair of men in painted masks and furs stood there, holding wands.

Charlie stirred. Alexandra's hands were on the bird in an instant - she didn't squeeze, just held on tightly, and though Charlie resisted a little, the raven made no further sound. One of the men tilted his head, but the moaning wind carried away the sound of Charlie's fluttering wings. Then he said, "Where's Manuelito?"

Alexandra slowly turned her head. The moon was behind her, and thus it put her directly in the blackest part of the shadow cast by the towering rock behind her. She could barely pick out the forms of Trish and Johnny, who were likewise huddled against a stone spire on the same side of the flat rock as her, but twenty feet away. She could just see the light gray of Johnny's socks and something reflecting in Trish's hair. If the men looked in that direction and squinted long enough, they would probably notice something in the shadows, but with a quick glance they could easily miss the teenagers.

The other man spoke. "Nothing is going right." Then he said something in Navajo; it sounded like cursing.

Alexandra heard a startled gasp, and then Trish screamed.

The men spun around and pointed their wands. Johnny leaped to his feet with a startled exclamation.

Alexandra struck the nearest wizard with a Porcupine Quills Curse. Spines erupted all over his body, perforating the furs he was wearing and causing him to drop his wand. Alexandra used a Spinning Jinx to lift him off his feet and hurl him into his companion. The second man screamed as the spines pierced him. While they were both thrashing in pain on the ground, Alexandra proceeded to Stun them until their bodies stopped twitching with each burst of red light from her wand.

It all happened in seconds.

"Who - what -?" Johnny babbled, while Trish continued screaming.

"Shut up!" Alexandra pointed her wand at Trish and said, "*Silencio!*" This did not make the other girl any less hysterical, but Alexandra could no longer hear her. She held out a hand, while Charlie took to the air.

A whoosh of air announced another person Apparating to the summit. Alexandra turned and blasted the masked figure off his feet before he'd completely settled on the ground, then Stunned him repeatedly as she had the other two.

She heard a crack and a thump behind her, and whirled to see Johnny standing over a fourth man, holding a rock in both hands. Johnny dropped the rock when he saw Alexandra's wand pointed at him.

She lowered her wand, paused, listened, and then used a Stunning Charm and a Full-Body Bind Spell on the man Johnny had just bashed over the head.

"These are antizizis," she said.

Johnny shook as if he might be about to faint.

"Wicked! Wicked!" screamed Charlie, and Alexandra felt the presence behind her before she heard it.

Her natural impulse was to turn and fling a hex, but some other instinct told her it was too late - instead she said, "*Protego Totalus!*" The Shield Charm glowed in the air before she turned, and glistening purple goo splashed against it and bubbled when it dripped to the rock at her feet.

John Manuelito stood facing her. He was not wearing a carved wooden mask like the other Navajo witches; his face was a mask of mingled fury and disbelief.

The Bones of Their Victims

"Alexandra Quick." John Manuelito dragged each word out as if it were poison on his tongue. "How -"

Alexandra didn't wait for him to finish. She waved away her Shield Charm and hurled a curse. He blocked it and disappeared. There was no 'pop' of Apparition - he simply sank into the rock.

"What?" Alexandra was startled in spite of herself. Then, remembering her fight with Henry Tsotsie and a furious battle in the basements beneath Charmbridge two years earlier, she threw herself forward, landing hard and rolling to her feet. Four stone hands were grasping the air where she had been standing a moment ago, as if some monster beneath the rock were reaching up to blindly grab at her.

John rose out of the rock a few yards away. Alexandra, in her anger, spat fire from her wand instead of using a Stunner. The flames washed over him and he yelled before he could protect himself with a Fireproof Charm. His own wand shot smoke, and Alexandra blew it back on him with a miniature whirlwind, but not before she'd inhaled some of it. It went down her throat like slimy fingers, and then those fingers were squirming and poking in her guts. She fell to her knees.

John yelled again as a raven's shriek drowned out the sounds of Alexandra choking and gagging. She looked up in time to see John bat Charlie out of the air with a powerful sweep of his arm. The raven tumbled to the ground and fluttered there. Alexandra forced down her nausea, whispered a counter-spell, and hacked everything out of her lungs with a sputtering cough that left a disgusting stream of spit and vomit trailing from her mouth as she staggered to her feet.

Blood dripped down John's face, and smoke curled around his arm and shoulder where Alexandra had scorched him. He had his wand raised already, but the spell he was about to cast died when a rock smacked him in the back of the head.

He swayed but didn't fall. He turned, his eyes black with rage. Alexandra shouted, "*Protego Totalus!*" just in time to stop the curse John threw at Johnny. It split her Shield Charm into yellow fragments that melted in the wind. Johnny looked terrified, but he was reaching for another rock. Alexandra and John exchanged

curses, both of them dazed and unable to fully concentrate. Whenever John could point his wand away from Alexandra between her attempts to hex him, he flung curses at either Charlie or Johnny. It was cowardly and would have left him easier to counterattack, except that Alexandra had to Block his spells to protect the raven and the boy, and Blocking Jinxes were harder when the spell being blocked wasn't directed at her.

Johnny threw another stone, this one jagged and the size of a softball. John Manuelito shattered it with a spell, and Alexandra said, "*Levicorpus!*" while he was distracted. The Navajo witch somersaulted into the air, heels-over-head, but instead of throwing a spell from his wand, he exhaled, and a cloud of smoke poured out of him as if he had a furnace in his belly. Alexandra backed away, covering her mouth with the thin cotton sleeve of her shirt. She pointed her wand at her familiar and said, "*Accio Charlie!*" The stunned raven slid across the stone, just ahead of the cloud of smoke, and she scooped the bird up and ran toward Johnny and Trish, before turning to cast another whirlwind spell to blow the smoke away from them.

John said, "*Liberacorpus*" and released himself from her spell, but he landed with a thud, and rose to his feet rubbing his head.

"You must like getting dropped on your head," Alexandra said.

"You must like watching people die," John said.

Alexandra snarled. "I'd like to watch you die." She flung a particularly nasty curse at him, a crackling ball of spite that Maximilian had warned her could stop even a wizard's heart if he were unwary enough to be struck there.

John wasn't unwary, and it was an easy curse to stop. He laughed and nodded in a gesture that was almost appreciative. "I was surprised that you were the one who came back. I didn't think your brother would turn out to be the weak one."

"Fuck you!" Alexandra flung one hex after another at him, even though she knew his mocking laughter was meant to goad her. He deflected them without difficulty, but in the furious onslaught, he couldn't counter-attack. Only when she finally ran out of breath and the red rage cleared from her vision did she pause.

"Maximilian was better than you," she said, panting, sweat shining on her forehead despite the cold. "And so am I."

"This isn't the Charmbridge Dueling Club." John made a gesture with his free hand. Alexandra raised her wand to cast a Blocking Jinx, but nothing flew at her. Then rock moved beneath her feet and she jumped instinctively. Her Seven-League Boots carried her to the other side of the rock shelf and almost to the very edge. John blinked in surprise, but the rolling waves of stone, like the back of a serpent buckling the surface, tossed Johnny and Trish, throwing them off their feet and pushing them toward the opposite edge.

Charlie squawked and fluttered in Alexandra's arms. She released the raven, hoping her familiar would fly free of the crossfire, and threw another curse at John. He cast a Shield Charm and laughed at her from behind it.

Johnny screamed, "Trish!" The girl went sliding over the edge. He caught her wrist and was almost dragged with her.

"*Feordupois!*" Alexandra said, and the Deadweight Spell squashed Johnny against the lip of the rock shelf. He barely maintained his grip on Trish's wrist. The distraction of trying to save the teenagers almost cost Alexandra an eye as she cast a Blocking Jinx just in time to deflect a sharp spike hurtling at her face.

"How does one girl cause so much trouble?" John Manuelito was no longer smirking and smiling; he was showing his temper at last. "What are you doing here?" He flung more hissing black spikes at her. They melted against her Shield Charm and she could only pray Charlie was out of the way of the ones that flew past on either side of her, turning to blue-black smoke and leaving a greasy furrow where they struck rock.

"You came after me, so I came after you," Alexandra said.

He frowned at her, and then Alexandra saw a serpentine coil of solid rock wrap around Johnny, who was still lying on the edge of the precipice trying to hold onto Trish. Alexandra ran past John in a flash, surprising the Indian warlock again with her speed. She reached Johnny in the blink of an eye and blasted apart the animated rock before it could crush him, then whirled to face John Manuelito again.

He had not thrown a curse. Instead, he was kneeling over one of the fallen men.

"Save the sheep then," he said in a mocking tone, though his expression was angry. "Sometimes wolves have to become sheep." He spoke in Navajo, and Alexandra saw a knife in his hand. It flashed and then there was blood on the blade.

"Help," Johnny croaked. Trish was screaming silently, still unable to make a sound thanks to the Silencing Charm. Johnny lost his grip on her and she fell.

Alexandra saw Trish's face receding, like something in a slow nightmare, eyes wide and filled with terror. John Manuelito was moving to another one of the fallen Navajo witches, still holding his knife, and Trish was plummeting to the ground, hundreds of feet below.

Alexandra pointed her wand at the falling girl. She didn't even know if a Falling Charm would work on someone at this distance. She made a wish and cast the spell. She couldn't tell if it took effect; shadows and moonlight played over Witches' Rock and made it impossible to see the falling figure, and Alexandra had to turn back to face John.

He stood in the moonlight holding a knife dripping with blood.

"You would have made a much better sacrifice," John said. "You were supposed to be the sacrifice. It's what you were *born* for."

"What?" Alexandra raised her wand to strike him down.

"This place really was used by 'ǣnt'ijhnii," John said. "The bones of their victims are interred beneath the stone we stand on."

"So?" Forcing aside her confusion, Alexandra threw a curse, determined to shut him up and defeat him once and for all.

John laughed, then turned and ran for the edge. He leaped before Alexandra could stop him. She ran to the edge and looked down, but she could not see the falling body. He had probably used a Falling Charm on himself; Alexandra threw a few fireballs after him, but the glow they made before bursting against the rocks below didn't reveal her nemesis.

She ran to the first of the men John had squatted next to. She gasped. His throat was cut and blood was spurting out and puddling on the rock under him. A glance to the body two yards away told her John had done the same thing to the second man. He hadn't reached the other two.

Alexandra tried to cast a healing spell on the wound, but all she knew were basic first aid charms; the corners of the glistening smile John had cut beneath the man's jaw came together, but this didn't stem the flow of blood at all. Neither did a Blood-Clotting Spell - there was just too much coming out of him. She ignored Johnny's moaning and sobbing while she looked helplessly at the dying man, and then thought of one other thing she could do.

With a widdershins gesture, she used the bit of Dark Arts that John Manuelito had taught her: a Wound-Relocating Spell. The slash across the wizard's throat disappeared. Blood began gushing from his thigh. She got up and stumbled to the second man. She started to do the same thing again, but saw that the second victim's wooden mask had fallen away, and his eyes were open and unblinking. The blood had stopped spurting from the severed arteries in his throat. Alexandra put a hand on his neck, then over his heart to be sure, and felt failure and frustration.

She returned to the wounded man, tore a few of the animal skins from his body, wrapped them tightly around his upper leg, then cast Blood-Clotting spells until she thought she had probably all but stopped circulation in his leg. She didn't care.

She stood up and looked dully down at the dead man and the wounded man, both lying in puddles of blood.

"Charlie," she called hoarsely. Relief pierced her numbness when the raven squawked and landed on her shoulder.

"Pretty bird," she whispered, and walked over to Johnny.

He was crying. "You let Trish die!"

"Maybe not."

"What?" he choked.

Alexandra reversed the Deadweight Spell she'd cast on him, and he gasped as he was able to move again.

"TRISH!" Alexandra yelled. "CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Her voice echoed, but the only answer was a distant howl. The werewolves were still roaming the desert, and might be nearer than they sounded. She remembered that she had cast a Silence spell on the other girl. Trish couldn't answer even if she could hear her.

Alexandra nuzzled the raven on her shoulder. "Charlie, can you find Trish?"

"Pretty bird," Charlie said.

"I saw her fall!" Johnny wiped his eyes. "It's got to be three or four hundred feet to the ground!"

Charlie took off. Alexandra went to her backpack and took out the Skyhook.

Johnny stammered: "What - what was all that stuff - I don't understand - this can't be real, it just can't!"

Alexandra ignored him and walked back to the ledge. Far below, she heard flapping, and then Charlie cawed loudly: once, twice, thrice. There was some other noise, like a scrambling amidst the rocks at the base of Witches' Rock.

"Trish!" Alexandra yelled. "I'm going to throw down the Skyhook. You have to trust me. Pick up the rope and hold onto it. Whatever you do, don't let go. If you don't want to be left down there with the werewolves, do as I say!"

"She's alive?" Johnny rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and stared at Alexandra in disbelief.

Alexandra threw the Skyhook over the side. It fell with a whistling sound, trailing rope, and hit the ground with a distant thud. Another howl echoed across the desert; this one sounded nearer.

"Trish!" Alexandra yelled. "Pick up the rope! Wrap it around yourself! Hold on tight!" She waited, aware of Johnny coming up behind her. It occurred to her the boy could easily push her over the side, but he just stood there.

Charlie cawed, and three wolves howled in chorus.

"Stand back." Alexandra closed her eyes as she gripped her wand.
"Accio Skyhook!"

There was a series of bumps, thuds, skids, and a long dragging sound. Rocks showered down the side of the tall rock surface. Then the Skyhook came flying over the side and landed at Alexandra's feet. She almost dropped her wand while grabbing it, and said, "Help me!"

Stunned, Johnny grabbed it too. There was a heavy weight at the end of the rope. The two of them hauled on the rope - in truth, Johnny did most of the hauling - and at last, a very bruised girl, clinging with a death grip to the rope, sobbing silently and covered in bloody scrapes and torn clothing, was dragged back up to where they stood.

Johnny pulled her away from the edge and wrapped his arms around her, stammering incoherent questions. Alexandra didn't attempt to answer any of them. She almost collapsed against a stone outcropping, rested with her back to it, and ended the Silence Spell almost as an afterthought. Trish's sobs became audible.

Charlie joined Alexandra, perching on her knee.

"Pretty bird," Alexandra said, reaching out to stroke her familiar.

Trish screamed.

What now? Alexandra thought, regretting she'd taken off the Silence Spell. Then she saw what Trish was screaming at.

Where the dead Navajo witch lay, a black spectral figure was rising from his corpse. It was shadowy and insubstantial, with none of the features of the dead man, not at all resembling the ghosts of Alexandra's acquaintance. Its black and empty face radiated malice.

Alexandra shivered as she rose to her feet. She knew this creature. She had seen them when they came through a portal from the Lands Beyond. Evil spirits of the dead, different from ghosts, malevolent and - more importantly - able to harm the living.

"Chindi!" Johnny gasped, his voice full of horror and revulsion.

Alexandra pointed her wand at it and said, "*Anathema jibay!*"

The Chindi howled. The sound was like a moan heard from a distant cave, and the spirit vanished into the night, Banished by Alexandra's spell.

The top of the rock shimmered with a black haze, and then Chindi were everywhere, rising from the stone all around them.

The bones of their victims, Alexandra thought, and she said, "Fly, Charlie, fly!"

She Banished one spirit after another, trying to drive them away from the other teenagers. Johnny had thrown himself over Trish and was huddling on top of her, but his bravery did little good when the Chindi could fly through him as easily as they flew through rock. They were swirling all around like an evil smog darkening the air and sucking heat out of it. Johnny twitched and shuddered, and his screams were as shrill and hysterical as Trish's. Alexandra's glowing wand seemed to frighten the spirits a little, but she couldn't keep them more than an arm's length away, and after the third time one reached out of the stone and grabbed her legs in ghostly fingers that felt like cold fire, she fell and couldn't stand again. She kept Banishing them, but realized with a moment of acuity and despair that they weren't just coming from Witches' Rock itself. Lying on her side and looking out across the desert, she saw wraiths flying through the air from ridges and arroyos and hills and abandoned hogans. They were converging on Witches' Rock like iron filings drawn to a magnetic needle, like crows coming home to roost. To what purpose, to kill her? She was past the point of caring. She could cast Banishing spells until dawn and still not Banish them all. Already she was shaking and sweating, but the sensation that gripped her was not fever, but coldness and clamminess, reaching all the way to the pit of her stomach. The unliving things were pressing close, sensing her weakness, fearful of her wand but eager to steal her breath from her...

She heard a pop and felt a gust of wind. Then someone bellowed: "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A silver flash of light blinded her and drove away the ghosts. There were more pops and more voices repeating the incantation. Alexandra lifted her head with an effort.

Henry Tsotsie stood over her. There were other Indian wizards there too, all wielding wands and facing the mass of angry ghosts, who were swirling around Witches' Rock in a howling maelstrom.

Glowing silver animals were flying through the air, and where they flew, Chindi shrieked and melted away. Alexandra saw an eagle, a deer, a fox. Each one was shining and beautiful as it cut through the Chindi like a stream of mercury through black water. The animals circled around them all, protecting the people and dissolving the evil spirits.

A luminescent jackrabbit scampered across the rock and jumped through a ghost, turning it to dust. It ran to Henry Tsotsie and sat there a moment at his feet, face to face with Alexandra. Its brilliant eyes regarded her without blinking and its luminous silver nose twitched. There was something familiar in that countenance, and then Tsotsie flicked his wand and one of the rabbit's ears flicked in perfect synchronicity with the wand, before leaping away to banish another Chindi.

"Charlie," Alexandra mumbled. She knew she should be worried about Johnny and Trish, too, but all she could think about was Charlie.

She never quite lost consciousness, although with the chills and the sickness, she wasn't sure if she was delirious or dreaming, nor did she have much sense of time passing. She was aware of someone picking her up. She heard chanting. She thought she saw Indian medicine men and women reaching into pouches for handfuls of glittering powder which they scattered over Witches' Rock and cast off the edge. There was definitely a squeezing sensation which meant she'd been Apparated, which was why she wasn't on Witches' Rock now.

She was lying on a blanket. Heat radiated from red-hot stones lying on coals. She was inside a small, circular room that was swelteringly hot. Several people were chanting. They had been chanting for quite a long time.

Billi Tewawina bent over her and touched her forehead, her chest, her belly, her wrists, her feet. Alexandra wanted to ask questions, but she was afraid she'd disturb the ritual.

She was covered in sweat. She was soaking in it. She wore a dress or a cotton shift of some sort - not what she'd been wearing before.

"You can stand up, now," Billi said. She offered a hand. Alexandra stood. There were other Indians in the stone hogan. Alexandra didn't know if they were Navajos or Hopis. She wasn't sure if they were wizards either; the sticks a couple of them held were not like the wands Alexandra was familiar with, but much longer and thicker, with beads and feathers attached. The Indians sat on wooden stools and chanted, and one man was beating a drum, while a woman shook a rattle.

Alexandra was not the only one who had been lying on the floor. Arranged around the fire on blankets were Trish, Johnny, and an adult man Alexandra didn't recognize. All of them wore cotton shifts like hers. Trish and Johnny's eyes were closed, and they were breathing deeply as if asleep.

Surreptitiously, Alexandra ran her hands along her front and sides. She could not feel any pockets, or the presence of her wand.

"Your things are outside," Billi whispered in her ear. "Come on." She led Alexandra to a wooden door and they stepped outside, into the cold air of the desert beneath a morning sun. The shock after stepping out of the sauna within made her feel faint; Alexandra was grateful for Billi's hand at her elbow, though she managed not to stumble.

They were in some completely different part of the desert, this one all white stones and occasional thorny plants. There were mountains in the distance, as everywhere else Alexandra had seen in Dinétah, but no other familiar landmarks. She could be anywhere in the Indian Territories, she thought.

The only person waiting outside was Henry Tsotsie, sitting behind the wheel of his truck, which was in remarkably good condition considering the last time she'd seen it was after a giant stone snake had flipped it over on the highway.

"Alexandra!"

Alexandra held out her arms as Charlie flew from the roof of Tsotsie's cab to her arms. She held the raven and took long, deep breaths.

"Henry has your wand," Billi said. "You might want to wash up and get dressed." She indicated a second building, smaller than the first, made of wood.

"Was I unconscious?" Alexandra asked.

"You were very feverish, so you probably don't remember much."

"That was some kind of a healing ritual? For ghost-sickness?"

"Yes."

"What about Johnny and Trish? And who's that other guy?"

"They'll be all right, but the boy and the girl were touched worse than you, and they don't have their own magic, so the ceremony will be longer for them. The other man was one of the Aurors who went to get you." Billi clucked her tongue.

She didn't seem inclined to answer other questions, so Alexandra went into the wooden shack, which turned out to be an outhouse, though a remarkably clean-smelling one. It had a partition separating the toilet from a tub full of hot water and a basket with another set of clean clothes for her. She washed herself off with the cloth provided and got dressed, relieved to find that her magical boots were also in the basket. She didn't see her backpack. She walked outside and realized she was still weak, very hungry, and even more thirsty.

Billi was standing next to Henry Tsotsie's truck, speaking to him through his rolled-down window. When Alexandra reached the truck, the Navajo Auror gestured at her to get in. She did so, making sure Charlie entered as well. Charlie immediately perched on the dashboard.

"You're a brave girl, Alexandra," Billi said. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Alexandra was nonplussed. "You're sure Johnny and Trish will be all right?"

"I'm going back inside to take care of them." The Hopi Healer waved a hand and walked back into the hogan.

Henry Tsotsie hadn't said a word to her yet. He handed her a canteen. Alexandra didn't ask what was in it; she just took it and drank. The water was ice-cold and delicious.

After gulping down half the canteen, she wiped her mouth and asked, "Now what?"

He took the canteen back. "Now I take you to the Portkey station and send you home, like I was trying to do before."

"Just like that?"

"Haven't you spent enough time in Din~~o~~tah? That bird can't sit on the dashboard." He started the truck.

Alexandra reached for Charlie. "Have you ever tried keeping a raven in your lap?"

"Keep it off the dashboard or it's going to have to fly outside."

"Big fat jerk!" Charlie said.

Alexandra cradled the raven under one arm. Charlie fussed and squawked, but settled down a little after a few minutes, while the truck rolled over hard stones until it reached an unmarked dirt road. They began bumping along over rocks and around sagebrush and thornbushes.

They went almost a mile before Tsotsie spoke again. "I suppose you're hungry."

"A little." In fact, Alexandra was starving. Charlie was making sounds in response to the rumble of her stomach.

"We'll stop to get something to eat. It's about an hour until we hit 64. Are you going to starve to death before then?"

"What if I was? Would you Apparate us? Or conjure some food?"

"You can't conjure food. Don't they teach you that at Charmbridge Academy?"

"Speaking of which, are you going to give me my wand back?"

She expected him to tell her he'd give it to her when they reached the Portkey station, or not answer at all. She was surprised when, after a moment of silence, he slid it out of a pocket inside his coat and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said. She looked back through the window of the cab at the back of the truck, but it was covered with a tarp.

"Your backpack is there," Tsotsie said. "The Skyhook is in it."

Alexandra settled into the seat and let him drive for a while. The desert didn't change much, and it was blindingly bright. She squinted, thinking about everything that had happened the previous night.

"What happened to the werewolves?" she asked at last.

"We rounded them up before they attacked anyone."

"What about the Dark Convention warlocks? I mean, the Navajo witches? John Manuelito's friends?"

"In custody."

"And John?"

Tsotsie pursed his lips. "We're still looking for him."

Alexandra closed her eyes and sighed.

They passed a few more hogans and wooden houses, and once a trailer. Occasionally there were Navajos outside watching them go by; once, they had to stop to let a flock of sheep move past. A dog kept the sheep together, and an old man nodded to Henry Tsotsie as he followed the animals.

After another half an hour, Tsotsie spoke again. "What you did was very foolish."

Alexandra looked out the window and didn't answer.

"What were you expecting to find at that stone hogan?" he asked.

"John Manuelito."

"You shouldn't have gone there by yourself. You should have told me that John Manuelito knew about that place. Yuhzhee Redhorse is dead -"

"I *tried* to tell you!" Alexandra snapped. "You wouldn't listen to me! I had no idea what some spot on a map was, I didn't know it was a jail for werewolves!"

"Not a jail. After they transform, they're free to run and howl outside, but are kept within lines we draw in the desert, and other charms keep any ordinary folk away."

"Until the Dark Convention showed up and killed Ms. Redhorse. I saw her killed! If you'd listened to me, maybe you would have warned her, but you just wanted to get rid of me and wouldn't listen to anything I said!"

"It was very foolish for you to take on a coven of witches."

"What would have happened if I hadn't been there?"

Tsotsie was quiet for a long time after that. Finally, he said, "The witches were going to take the shapeshifters - the lycanthropes - and set them loose near Little Creek or another town. You prevented that."

Alexandra petted Charlie, who was squirming beneath her arm.

Tsotsie said, "I don't quite understand why the two men you left unconscious by the stone hogan weren't touched."

"I kind of distracted the werewolves. To get them to chase me."

"You figured you could outrun them with those magical boots of yours."

Alexandra looked down at her feet, then shrugged. "Your werewolves didn't seem to be prevented from crossing any lines in the desert."

"Killing Yuhzhee destroyed the wards. Most Navajo magic is tainted by death. Why did you save those kids?"

"What, I'm going to just leave them to get eaten by werewolves?" When he didn't answer, she muttered, "You really do think I'm just a trial and a pain, don't you?"

Tsotsie was silent again for a while. Alexandra was becoming very hungry, and she was relieved when she finally saw a small two-lane highway. Tsotsie turned onto it, and the truck picked up speed.

"I was expecting your Trace Office would notice me casting spells and someone would come get me," Alexandra said. "That was my plan. I'd find out what John Manuelito and his coven were up to out there and then I'd cast some spells and you'd know where I was and show up and arrest him."

"That was your plan, huh?"

Alexandra couldn't read the Auror's expression. "More or less."

They went past a sign that said Farewell was ninety miles ahead. Occasionally they passed other vehicles, mostly driven by Indians.

"Finding a runaway teenager was not actually at the top of our priority list," Tsotsie said. "The Dark Convention - John Manuelito and his fellow 'Ḏnt'j̱hnii, and some *belagana* warlocks as well - did a lot of damage all over the Indian Territories last night. They even tried to call Chindi from Orange Rock itself. But they were counting on the few Aurors in Diṉtah to be even busier than we were, with werewolves running loose and whatever ritual they were going to perform on top of Witches' Rock. What John Manuelito did wasn't nearly as bad as what they probably planned to do." Tsotsie glanced at Alexandra again. "He cut one man's throat, but the other one was cut along the thigh. Can you explain that? Your two friends weren't able to give us many details about what happened on Witches' Rock."

"John cut both their throats. I used a Wound Relocating Charm on the first man. I didn't reach the second man in time."

Tsotsie considered this. "A Wound Relocating Charm is classified as Dark Arts."

"You going to add it to the list of things the Wizard Justice Department is going to charge me with?"

A small town materialized on the road ahead. It wasn't much more than a collection of houses and a gas station and convenience store, but Alexandra's stomach rumbled at the prospect of food.

They stopped at the convenience store. Tsotsie bought her a sandwich, an apple, and a bottle of green tea. Alexandra tried not to eat too quickly; her stomach almost rebelled against the food, as if it had been days since she'd eaten last. She'd finished most of the sandwich before they even got back to the truck. She spared a corner of the sandwich for Charlie, whom they had left locked in the cab. The raven devoured the scraps greedily while Alexandra tried not to feel covetous of those last few bites. She began eating the apple. Tsotsie didn't speak again until they were once more on the road with the town behind them.

"It's not your fault Yuhzhee Redhorse is dead," he said. "She was a friend of mine. What happened last night - a lot of things that happened last night - were terrible. There have always been a few witches making trouble in Din^otah, just like anywhere else, but we didn't realize that John Manuelito had brought so many outsiders here. The Dark Convention is more active in the Indian Territories than we thought. That's going to cause a lot of problems for us... from them and from the Wizard Justice Department."

"Oh." Alexandra wasn't sure what to say. "What do they want in the Indian Territories?"

"I imagine to stir up old ghosts. Cause trouble, unleash evil magic. Who knows what the Dark Convention wants, or why 'o^ont'jijnii do the things they do?"

Alexandra thought Tsotsie wasn't being entirely honest with her. He was an Auror and surely knew more than he was telling her. But telling her anything at all was an improvement. "So, nobody was killed? Besides Ms. Redhorse, and the dead anteennee?"

Tsotsie looked at her again. "Some others were killed."

"Oh." Alexandra wondered if the Auror would expand on that, and wasn't surprised when he didn't.

"You did some good," Tsotsie said. "You saved Johnny Thompson and Patricia Peshlakai. That was very brave."

"Are they going to... remember everything?" she asked.

"Did you really threaten to steal their hearts and turn them into beetles?"

"Only to scare them. I mean, to make them move faster. I was trying to save them from the werewolves!"

"I see." The Auror nodded slowly. "Well, you did do that."

"They saw everything. Werewolves and witches and Chindi."

Tsotsie's face was stone. "And you think they should be Obliviated because they're Muggles."

"I don't think that. But the Confederation makes a big deal out of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy."

"Yes."

Alexandra wasn't sure what his tone signified. "I don't like it. I understand why we have to keep magic secret - a lot of people would freak out if they knew magic was real - but I don't like Obliviators going around erasing memories." She fell into a brooding silence, thinking of Hecate Grimm.

Tsotsie said, in a careful tone of voice, "We try to take care of our own people. We never kept magic a secret, before the Confederation came."

Alexandra thought about that. "How will you keep Trish and Johnny from telling everyone?"

"You don't need to worry about that." He paused. "We can't hide the fact that two Muggles were exposed to the wizarding world, but my official reports don't need to mention every detail. For example, I didn't list everything you did that wasn't so helpful while you were in Din♦tah, like destroying a car engine, assaulting an Auror, and fleeing from custody. So those are things you probably don't need to tell them."

"Um, thanks," she said uncertainly.

"And probably the less you say about Johnny Thompson and Patricia Peshlakai, the better. I am not telling you to lie to anyone,

especially not a Special Inquisitor. But there's a difference between telling the truth and saying things that aren't important."

"I understand, I think." Alexandra rolled down the window and tossed the apple core out. Tsotsie frowned at her while she rolled up the window again.

"I'll pay for the damage to Ron Pete's car," she said.

"Huh." He grunted. "Will you? You have a couple thousand dollars?"

She thought about the account her father had given her. She'd have to go to the Colonial Bank of the New World to convert some of it into dollars, but... "If I send the money to you, will you make sure he gets it?"

"Sure." Tsotsie was unmoved, and Alexandra sensed his skepticism.

"You don't believe I will, do you?"

He shrugged. "We're used to white people coming onto the Reservation and making messes we have to clean up."

Alexandra slid lower in her seat. "I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble. I just wanted to stop John Manuelito. He killed a friend of mine and almost killed another, and he tried to kill me. I didn't come here to make trouble for you or get anyone hurt."

She wasn't sure, but it seemed the hard lines of Henry Tsotsie's face softened a little.

They spoke little after that. They drove through Farewell, came to another highway, and proceeded northeast, entering the mountains and crossing the Colorado border. Alexandra had been nodding off, and Charlie was quiescent in her arms, when Tsotsie said, "Portkey station's up ahead."

Alexandra sat up. The desert had been cold but dry, but now they were surrounded by snow. The highway, salted and plowed recently, cut a ribbon of black through the snow-covered rocks around them, but the only thing ahead of them was an unattended highway rest area.

"It's not a public station like in Chicago or New Amsterdam," Tsotsie said. "It's for official Confederation use only."

They pulled off the highway and parked in the lot, tires crunching over snow that had fallen since the lot had last been plowed. There were a couple of other cars there, and a truck. Unlike Henry Tsotsie's truck, the other vehicles had chains on their tires. A couple of people who were checking a map in their car stared at the white-haired girl with the raven in the company of a tall Indian man.

Alexandra tugged at her white bangs. "Can you fix my hair?"

Tsotsie answered seriously, "You want me to wave my wand right here?"

"Of course not." She frowned at him. "I mean before you send me back."

"I'm sure Diana Grimm or one of your teachers at that fancy school of yours can undo a little curse like that." He took her backpack out of the truck and handed it to her.

She snatched it angrily. "That truck driver was right."

"Truck driver?" The Navajo Auror glanced, puzzled, at the semi-truck that was sitting by a snow bank on the other side of the small parking lot.

"About Navajo cops." Alexandra pushed her arms through the straps and cinched the pack on her back.

Tsotsie gave her another one of his long looks, then led her to a pavilion that sheltered a giant road map behind thick plastic, a rack full of tourist brochures, and a small building with men's and women's restrooms and an unmarked door between them.

The Auror paused before the unmarked door.

"You're a dog," he said.

Alexandra was confused, then she colored. "Are you calling me a bitch?"

"What? No." For the first time, Tsotsie's equanimity was ruffled. "I wouldn't call someone that." He shook his head. "What John Manuelito said about wolves and sheep is true from his point of view - that's how he thinks. There are people who are wolves and prey on the weak, and people who are their victims. But there is another kind

of person, the kind of person who protects the sheep from the wolves. The sheepdogs."

"Kind of like Aurors," Alexandra said.

Tsotsie smiled wryly. "You could say that. You're a very brave girl. A troublesome juvenile delinquent, but a brave girl."

Alexandra found this almost touching. "If you catch John Manuelito, or find out anything about his whereabouts, will you let me know?"

Tsotsie's expression went flat again. "Let you know?"

"You're an Auror. Can't you get a message to me, c/o Charmbridge Academy?"

He sighed. "When we find John Manuelito, I'll let you know." He tapped his wand against the unmarked door and it opened. "There are two coffee cans on the top shelf. Make sure to put your raven in the first one before you touch the second." He caught her arm just before she stepped inside. "If I ever see you in Din~~o~~tah again, I'll turn you into a snake and put you in my pouch."

Alexandra said nothing when he released her. She stepped inside and found the coffee cans sitting on a shelf over an ordinary industrial sink in a room filled with cleaning supplies, tools, and trash cans.

"Sorry, Charlie." She knew how much animals hated travel by Portkey. She pushed the protesting bird into one of the cans, and sucked in her breath when the can disappeared, taking Charlie with it. Then she let out the rest of her breath and grabbed the second can, and was yanked through space, away from Din~~o~~tah.

The Witch's Lullaby

Alexandra hadn't even asked where she was going. She assumed Chicago, but she didn't arrive in a Portkey booth like the ones at the Chicago Wizardrail station. Instead, she landed sprawled on the concrete floor of a small room that was empty but for a chair, a plain wooden desk, and Diana Grimm.

The coffee can that had brought her here clattered to the floor. She sat up and found Charlie lying half out of the other can. She picked up the raven, who was making feeble, unhappy croaking sounds.

"Your bird will recover," Ms. Grimm said. She was wearing a black cloak with red trim, but underneath it was an ordinary long-sleeved shirt.

Alexandra rose to her feet, cradling her familiar. "So am I under arrest?"

The Special Inquisitor arched an eyebrow. "Should you be? I'm sure you've violated Charmbridge Academy's rules, but that's for Lilith to deal with. You've also broken a few Muggle laws, but it's not my job to enforce those, and I doubt your mother has filed a missing persons report."

"That would be hard, since my mother is a cat," Alexandra said.

Diana Grimm showed no reaction to the bitterness in Alexandra's voice. "I meant Claudia."

"I know who you meant. Claudia's not my mother."

"Well. She is your legal guardian, so until you turn eighteen, she still gets to decide what to do with you."

"Does she?"

"Let's not quarrel, Alexandra. I hope you appreciate how many strings I've pulled to bring you back without charges." She leaned closer. "*How many strings* I've pulled for you over the years."

That gave Alexandra pause. A lot of things had happened in the past three years, and she recalled uncomfortably how many things she had gotten away with, Lilith and Diana Grimm's threats notwithstanding. Had she been receiving favorable treatment all this

time? She'd assumed any leniency was simply so the Office of Special Inquisitions could continue to use her as a means of capturing her father. She was too angry at her aunt to want to feel obligated to her.

"You've been lying to me since the moment we met," she said.

"Lies of omission, about truths that weren't mine to tell."

"You would have told me the truth if it served your purpose."

Diana Grimm gave her one of those chilly looks she and her sister both excelled at. She reached out and seized Alexandra by the upper arms. Alexandra tried to pull away while holding onto Charlie, but Ms. Grimm's fingers tightened painfully. Her eyes became colder and harder.

"That was *my sister* you so casually refer to as a 'cat.' You've known her as your mother for all of four days now, and you've never really met her, not the real Hecate. You're angry because people didn't tell you things, not because anything was actually taken from you. You never even knew what you lost."

"That's because you all decided for me!" Alexandra snapped. "You just lied and lie -" She was silenced with a slap across the face.

She turned her head away and didn't look at her aunt while she put a hand to her burning cheek. Charlie squawked and struggled to be freed from her grasp.

Ms. Grimm spoke in a less icy tone. "You are feeling angry and aggrieved, and perhaps you have a right to. What you learned came as a shock, I have no doubt, and if it had been up to me, you would have learned the truth much sooner. But you'll mind your manners. I've told you before, I won't suffer insolence and disrespect from children. Not even my niece."

Alexandra dropped her hand from her cheek and tried to soothe Charlie, who had recovered enough to start making noise, and she was afraid the raven might direct a few choice words at Ms. Grimm. "So where are you taking me?"

"Back to Charmbridge Academy."

"Not to Larkin Mills?"

"Lilith asked me to bring you back to school. I suppose that means she isn't planning to expel you, though I wouldn't presume to speak for her." Ms. Grimm walked to the door of the small room and opened it. Beyond was a larger, more familiar set of offices. Alexandra had been here before, when the Special Inquisitor had questioned her and Maximilian after their return from Roanoke. It was the Wizard Justice Department building adjoining the Goblin Market in Chicago.

Alexandra walked out, and allowed her aunt to lead her past desks piled with papers being shuffled from one table to another by Clockwork golems, past a room where old men with humorless expressions and long wizards' robes consulted crystal globes and piles of colored sticks and glass marbles. Ms. Grimm waved her wand, transforming her cloak into a long fur coat, just before they stepped outside onto a Muggle street. They walked around the building to a small parking lot where Ms. Grimm's car was waiting.

They didn't say anything to each other until they were on the highway out of Chicago. Then Ms. Grimm asked her, "How did you get from Charmbridge to Chicago?"

Alexandra shrugged. "Hitchhiking."

"You didn't hitchhike down that mountain."

"I didn't fly a broom either, if that's what you're thinking."

"Stop being obstinate, Alexandra."

"What do you want me to tell you, that I used magic? Okay, I used magic. I broke the rules against underage magic use. I broke them here in Central Territory and I broke them all over Din~~de~~tah."

"Tell me about what happened in Din~~de~~tah."

"Didn't Henry Tsotsie tell you everything?"

Ms. Grimm smiled. "Oh, I very much doubt he told me everything, but he told me how heroic you were."

"He did?"

"You can understand why I'm skeptical."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes.

"I'd like to hear the tale in your words," Ms. Grimm said.

"What if I don't want to tell you anything more?"

"Then I'll pull the car off the highway and use Legilimency on you. I'd rather not."

Alexandra glared at her. "My father wasn't involved. I didn't see him once."

"I'm not solely interested in your father."

"Really?"

"Yes, really!" Ms. Grimm turned her head in Alexandra's direction and returned her glare. "For Merlin's sake, girl, must you make every single time we meet a battle of wills? Will you get it through your thick, stubborn head that I'm *not trying to hurt you*?"

Suspiciously, Alexandra rubbed her cheek. The sting was long gone.

It was as hard to think of Diana Grimm as her aunt as it was to stop thinking of Claudia as her mother, and just because the Special Inquisitor was her aunt didn't mean she actually felt any affection or desire to help her. And yet...

Charlie started pecking her hand. Alexandra released the raven, who fluttered up to the dashboard. Ms. Grimm frowned, but didn't demand the bird be removed.

"I was trying to find John Manuelito, because you couldn't," Alexandra said.

"How did you know where to find him?"

Alexandra hesitated, trying to think of a way not to talk about Quimley.

"Are you trying to protect Mary Dearborn?" Ms. Grimm asked.

Alexandra licked her lips. "Yes."

"Don't. She's already been questioned."

"Is she in trouble?"

"She's still at Charmbridge Academy. I don't think anything else need concern you. Dinah is a big place. How did you find John there?"

"From stuff Mary told me."

"Mary destroyed all her letters from John, but she has an excellent memory. He never told her anything more specific than 'the Indian Territories.' Stop trying to outwit me, Alexandra. For someone so angry at being lied to, you certainly don't mind lying whenever it suits you."

"I only do it to protect people."

"Or to protect yourself. So who are you trying to protect now?"

Alexandra sat back in the seat. Charlie was hopping back and forth restlessly, but Ms. Grimm still hadn't objected. Alexandra's fingers clenched her knees, as she tried to work out the consequences. "An elf."

"An elf." Ms. Grimm's mouth twitched. "You're going to tell me the same story you told Henry Tsotsie?"

"He didn't believe me either."

The Special Inquisitor drove on for a while, thinking about that. "Who is this elf who was able to find John Manuelito for you?"

"Not a house-elf, and not a Charmbridge elf. A free elf. And I don't want to say anything more about him. If you want to know any more, you're going to have to use Legilimency."

Ms. Grimm pursed her lips, while Alexandra waited. "An elf, then. This elf took you to Dinah?"

"No. He only told me where John was hiding."

Alexandra told Diana Grimm the rest of the story - mostly. She tried to leave out her Seven-League Boots, but the Special Inquisitor quickly ferreted out the information when Alexandra tried to explain

her trek across the desert and her flight from the werewolves. She gave Alexandra's boots a glance, but said nothing else about them.

Alexandra left out her encounter at the Orange Rock Library. When she came to Trish and Johnny, she mentioned finding the teenagers out in the desert while she was fleeing from the werewolves, but told Ms. Grimm that she'd sent them driving off in one direction while she led the werewolves in another. She didn't know if that story would hold up, as she didn't know what Henry Tsotsie had told her, but if the Inquisitor sensed any inconsistencies or untruths, she didn't say anything.

And finally Alexandra came to the battle on Witches' Rock, the Navajo witches, and the Chindi. Once she got to her recovery in the hogan with the Indian medicine men and women, she stopped talking.

By then, they were climbing the mountain to the Invisible Bridge. Alexandra noticed that Ms. Grimm didn't slow down at all, though the road was as icy and treacherous as it had been when she'd come down it a few days earlier.

"Quite a remarkable story," the Special Inquisitor said at last. "You're quite a remarkable girl."

Alexandra wasn't sure how to respond to that.

Ms. Grimm parked the car. Alexandra was not happy when the other witch accompanied her to the Invisible Bridge. "Are you afraid I'm going to run away again or something?"

Ms. Grimm gave her a wry smile. "Not really, though at this point nothing you do would surprise me. I need to speak to Lilith myself."

They stepped onto the Invisible Bridge and walked silently across it. Charlie took off, but rather than flying ahead, simply circled around them before landing on Alexandra's shoulder again.

Halfway out over the valley, Alexandra asked, "Are you going to see your other sister?"

"I don't have another sister, Alexandra. Not anymore."

"What do you mean you don't? Dean Grimm can undo the transformation -"

"For a few minutes, so you can exchange meaningless words with an empty, mindless shell?" Diana Grimm stopped and faced her.

Charlie glided off Alexandra's shoulder without a sound. Alexandra kept her eyes focused on her aunt. "She's not mindless."

"Hecate is gone, Alexandra. That... shell, that creature, that's not my sister. It's not your mother. Don't hope for anything from her; she's gone. Lilith should have left her be, not put her on display for you."

"She wasn't putting her on display, and if my mother is gone, it couldn't hurt her for me to meet her, could it?"

Diana's voice was as bitter as the cold wind whipping their hair. "Your mother? You're calling a woman you didn't know existed until a few days ago your mother? Claudia is your mother in every way that matters. She's the one who raised you like her own daughter."

A light snowfall had started just as they'd reached the top of the hill, and Alexandra's hair was becoming damp. She brushed it out of her eyes. "Okay," she said, "I'll tell you what - you don't tell me how I should feel about my... sister, and I'll keep my mouth shut about yours from now on."

Her aunt studied her a moment, tight-lipped, and then resumed walking. Alexandra followed her to the other side of the valley.

As they walked through the snowy woods, Alexandra said, "That's why you hate my father so much, isn't it? It's not just duty. It's personal for you."

"Your father permanently Obliviated my sister. It wasn't the Aurors, as he claims - it was him. He fled with you and left Hecate mindless."

Neither of them said anything else until they reached the steps of Charmbridge Academy. Then Ms. Grimm said, "Of course it's personal. But it's also duty. Your father is an enemy of the Confederation." She turned to face Alexandra. "You have no idea how much like Hecate you are."

She walked up the steps, leaving Alexandra behind. She didn't look back and didn't pause when Alexandra didn't accompany her through the front doors. Alexandra stood outside for several minutes, until she was shivering, then held up her arm. Charlie cawed and flew out of the woods. Alexandra walked inside, carrying her familiar on her arm as she proceeded to the Dean's office.

It was late afternoon; the hallways were crowded with students released from class, and they were already standing in knots talking amongst themselves after having been parted by the passage of the Special Inquisitor who looked exactly like the Dean. Through the space left in Diana Grimm's wake, Alexandra marched with Charlie on her shoulder, head held high. Conversations died or turned to shocked whispers. Everyone stared at her. She kept her eyes straight ahead, but she didn't make it past the front hall. Anna shouted: "Alexandra!" and practically ran into her arms, while Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence came rushing after her.

With the eyes of half the school on them, Alexandra embraced her friend.

"I'm okay," she said quietly. "Will you wait until we get back to our room before you start yelling at me?"

Anna made a laughing sound that threatened to turn into a sob, but she controlled it. Only her eyes betrayed her, glistening a little when she stepped back. "I won't yell at you if you promise you're going to tell me everything."

"I will."

Innocence asked, "What happened to your hair?"

Alexandra ran a hand through her hair. She'd forgotten it was still white. Constance and Forbearance tsked.

"I'd say she tried to cross an Age Line," Anna said.

"I'd wager she crossed more'n that," Forbearance said.

"Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes," said Charlie.

Alexandra gave her friends a wan smile. "Dean Grimm is waiting for me, and I'll be in even more trouble if I keep her waiting. I'll see you this evening, okay? If I'm not expelled or turned into a pig."

"Turned into a pig?" Innocence was horrified and thrilled at the same time.

Alexandra lifted Charlie off her shoulder. "Anna, will you take Charlie back to our room, please?"

"Never!" said Charlie.

Alexandra nudged her familiar. "Please behave, Charlie. Maybe Anna will give you some owl treats if you're good."

Charlie said, "Anna," and stepped onto Anna's wrist.

When Alexandra turned around, she almost bumped into David, who, with Dylan, had joined the small group gathered around her.

David shook his head at her. "You crazy, girl."

"Thanks a lot," she said. "It's nice to be back."

As she brushed past, Dylan said, "That white hair thing looks so anime."

She made it to the administrative wing without being accosted further, though she saw Ms. Shirtliffe standing by the cafeteria, arms folded, wearing her uniform. Alexandra must have missed a dress drill. She nodded to the teacher, who didn't move or respond.

As soon as Alexandra stepped into the main office, Miss Marmsley said, "What took you so long, Miss Quick? You were supposed to be with Special Inquisitor Grimm."

"Yes, ma'am." Alexandra didn't argue.

"Go in." The painting gestured at the Dean's office door.

Alexandra walked into the Dean's office. Her eyes automatically went to Galen, who was curled up on the hearth like last time. Diana was standing across the desk from the seated Dean, with her back to the cat.

"You must be feeling very secure, since you felt entitled to take a detour on your way to my office," the Dean said.

"I didn't take a detour, ma'am." Alexandra composed herself. "I just gave Charlie to Anna to take back to our room. Charlie doesn't like cats." She forced herself not to look at Galenthias.

The Dean kept her cold gaze on Alexandra a moment, then said, "Is there anything else, Diana?"

"Not that we need to talk about right this moment," Diana Grimm said.

Lilith Grimm hesitated a moment, and it seemed to Alexandra that there was a hint of disappointment in her voice when she spoke again. "Well then, thank you for bringing Miss Quick back."

"Just doing my duty." Diana Grimm strode to the door. "I can't tell you how much I enjoy it when my job consists of collecting teenage runaways. Do try to keep her *in* school this time, Lilith."

The Special Inquisitor barely looked in Alexandra's direction before walking out the door, closing it behind her. Alexandra and the Dean faced each other silently across the room. Alexandra couldn't read her other aunt's expression.

She remained standing, resisted fidgeting, and finally spoke first. "I think she hates me."

Lilith Grimm sat back in her chair slowly. "Is that what you think?"

Alexandra looked away from the Dean, with her dry tone and flat expression, and her eyes settled on the black cat who had not moved from where she lay on the hearth. "She didn't even look at her sister."

"I am her sister. Galenthias is a cat."

Galenthias's ears twitched. Alexandra thought about walking over to pick her up, but the Dean's gaze held her.

Ms. Grimm folded her hands on her desk. "Enough distractions. Do you want to remain at Charmbridge Academy, Alexandra?"

Alexandra lifted her chin. "Yes, ma'am."

"You promised me you'd be better, that you'd stop doing reckless things that endanger yourself and others."

"I didn't endanger anyone else. It was John Manuelito endangering me and others. I almost got him, Ms. Grimm. I found him when the Auror Authorities of two Territories couldn't."

"You ran away and almost got yourself killed."

"You haven't even heard what happened -"

Ms. Grimm held up a hand. "Diana told me everything I need to know. I discussed the matter with Claudia. She's undecided about whether to allow you to remain at Charmbridge, as am I. Your behavior between now and April will determine whether I will allow you to come back after spring break. I imagine what you say to Claudia when you go home will determine whether she sends you back. In either case, you're on probation for the rest of the school year. Any further infractions will mean suspension, not detention."

Alexandra filtered out the first things she wanted to say, while she considered her response more carefully. When she spoke, her voice was calm. "Claudia doesn't want me. She never wanted me."

"Is that what she told you?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Alexandra was annoyed at Ms. Grimm's quizzical expression. "It's not like we have to keep pretending."

"I'm so sorry, Alexandra. I didn't realize how unwanted you were. You never told me that Claudia abused and neglected you."

"What? I didn't say she abused me."

"But she was negligent? She didn't protect you, care for you, see that you were fed, clothed, safe? And your stepfather? Did he ever mistreat you?"

"No, but -"

"But you were unwanted," Ms. Grimm said softly. "So Claudia never had a kind word for you... never showed any affection... never cared about you. You grew up in a cold, unloving home. Is that what you're saying?"

"I..." Alexandra glared at her aunt. "You're mocking me."

Ms. Grimm rose from her chair and walked to a tall cabinet standing against the opposite wall. Trophies and plaques and a miniature Clockwork golem sat on top of it, and behind the glass of the upper section were beaming photographs of famous Charmbridge alumni, including several Territorial Governors and a former Governor-General. The Dean took a key out of a pocket in her robes and unlocked the wooden doors that hid the bottom half of the cabinet. In the darkness within were shelves holding a variety of books and artifacts. Ms. Grimm withdrew a large silver bowl with runes and inscriptions along its edges. She held it cradled in one arm while closing the cabinet doors with her other hand, then walked back to her desk to set it just back from the edge facing Alexandra.

"Is that a Pensieve?" Alexandra asked.

"Yes. Have you seen one before?"

Alexandra nodded, while Ms. Grimm opened a desk drawer and withdrew a small wooden box with a hinged lid. She lifted the lid to reveal several vials filled with silver liquid. She pointed her wand at the Pensieve, and water from the end of her wand filled the bowl.

"What are you planning to show me?" Alexandra asked.

Ms. Grimm poured the contents of one of the vials into the bowl. Like shimmering reflective oil, silvery light spread across the surface of the liquid. "Diana used to visit Claudia frequently, during the first few years of your life, before you left Chicago. She collected some of Claudia's memories and brought them back here." Alexandra's eyes followed Ms. Grimm's to the floor, where Galenthias, bored with sitting on the hearth, was now rubbing against her ankles. "I told you that we tried to restore Hecate's memories. We thought perhaps memories of her daughter might help."

Alexandra forced herself to look away from the cat and back at the Pensieve. "Your sister took memories from Claudia?"

"Claudia gave them to her."

"She gave away memories of me."

"Merlin and Circe, child," Ms. Grimm said. "Bottling a memory isn't the same as Obliviation. Claudia still has plenty of memories of you, and the ones that were taken didn't leave empty holes." Her fingers tapped the hinged box.

"But - my father, when he Obliviated me..." Alexandra hesitated. Abraham Thorn had extracted her memories of her journey to the Lands Below with Maximilian so that Diana Grimm couldn't learn what had happened, then returned them to her in a silvery vial just like the ones in Ms. Grimm's case.

"What your father did was a dangerous bit of memory alchemy," Ms. Grimm said. "And it's more destructive when it's involuntary."

Alexandra thought about the note she'd read, signed by Diana Grimm, when she'd sneaked into the Census Office in the Territorial Headquarters Building in Chicago when she was twelve. Diana Grimm had suspected Abraham Thorn of Obliviating Claudia Quick just after Alexandra was born. But Alexandra had known so little then, and she didn't know what to believe now. Her father, Diana Grimm, and Claudia had all turned out to be lying, so everything she'd learned was just as likely to be wrong.

Lilith Grimm was studying her. "We tried showing this memory to Hecate because it's one of the first of you using magic." She gestured at the Pensieve.

Curious despite herself, Alexandra walked to the desk, and after staring at her white-haired reflection for a moment, leaned over and dipped her head into the bowl.

As soon as her face broke the surface, she felt a moment of disequilibrium, as if she were falling out of the sky and into... a parking lot. No, she was in a car, and the car was sitting in a parking lot at a highway rest stop. Alexandra thought she even recognized the Interstate signs; beneath them, cars sped past in both directions on their way to and from Chicago.

"Ice cream," said a little girl, and Alexandra looked at the girl and felt even more out of place. The little girl had short, black hair cut in bangs that fell almost to her eyebrows, and bright green eyes. She was just barely old enough to sit in the car seat to which she was strapped, and she was pointing at a large, blue poster of a chocolate ice cream bar standing in front of the little travel mart where

motorists paid for gas and bought overpriced travelers' necessities and snacks.

"No," Claudia said firmly. Alexandra recognized her mother (*not my mother!*) sitting behind the wheel, younger and a little thinner, but her voice was the same as ever.

"Ice cream," the little girl repeated stubbornly.

"No ice cream, Alex." Claudia turned the keys in the ignition. "There's fruit and some ham and cheese in the lunchbox, and you've got a bottle of juice right there -"

"Ice cream!" little Alexandra said in an insistent voice, and she reached a chubby hand out and at the very limit of her reach, touched one finger to the vinyl surface of the dashboard in front of her. The car trembled and with a horrible cracking noise, the engine died.

Claudia sat speechless as smoke began curling from beneath the hood.

"Ice cream," the little girl said triumphantly, clapping her hands.

Then Claudia was frantically in motion. She got out of the car. Alexandra saw her younger self's expression transform from smug to concerned as Claudia opened the hood to see an engine block that was a cracked, smoking ruin, slammed it back down hard enough to shake the car, stormed in and out of the store, collapsed back into the driver's seat, and almost threw a chocolate ice cream bar at the child. "There! There's your ice cream! You wanted ice cream so badly, now eat it!"

Then Claudia pressed her face against the steering wheel and sobbed.

Finally, a small voice said, "Sorry."

Claudia lifted her head from the steering wheel. Little Alexandra's wide, concerned eyes were brimming. "Sorry, Momma." Tears spilled down her cheeks. Next to her, the ice cream bar was melting and soaking through its wrapper.

Claudia made a choking sound and reached over to unstrap the girl from her car seat and lift her into her arms. "Oh, Alex. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Alexandra - the older one who was voyeur to this scene with her younger self - yanked her head back out of the Pensieve and stood up. She wiped at her eyes automatically, though the magical fluid in the Pensieve stayed in the bowl, none of it clinging to her face.

"I don't remember that," she said, though now very faint memories did stir - being in a strange, unfamiliar place with lots of cars and trucks rumbling past, a tow truck and the smell of smoke, clinging to her mother and trying not to be scared...

"I'm not surprised," Ms. Grimm said. "You weren't even three." She held a vial over the Pensieve and stirred the waters with her wand. The silvery fluid was drawn back into the vial and the Dean stoppered it, then poured the contents of another one into the bowl. "That wasn't the first time you did something like that, according to Claudia, but -"

"All right," Alexandra said, "I get the point. I don't need to see any more memories about how hard it was raising me and how I ruined Claudia's life."

Ms. Grimm shook her head, and said with growing exasperation, "That is not the point I am trying to make." She gestured at the Pensieve.

Alexandra frowned, then slowly and suspiciously leaned forward to dip her face into the water again.

This was an earlier memory. Claudia was sitting at a table in the small kitchen of an efficiency apartment with medical textbooks and notebooks in front of her. It was late at night. Claudia looked tired, and she was wearing a sweat-soaked tank top, suggesting that the apartment was quite hot. A great clamor drowned out the usual street noises as a train went clattering past, and then a baby's cries filled the apartment. Claudia's fingers curled and she closed her eyes, letting out a long breath like someone whose last nerve was wearing thin to the point of snapping.

Alexandra started to pull away and out of the memory, but Ms. Grimm's hand on her shoulder stayed her. For a moment she almost

struggled - you could breathe while immersed in a Pensieve, but being held with one's face beneath the surface triggered an instinctive aversion to drowning. But when Claudia sighed and rose from the kitchen table, there was something about her weary resignation that made Alexandra wait to see just what she would do.

In a small but very new-looking crib, a baby wailed until Claudia picked it up. There was no impatience or exasperation in her actions this time. The baby, who Alexandra watched with fascination, unable to quite believe that the little squalling creature was her, continued crying while Claudia walked around the apartment patting it and murmuring soothingly. But only when she began to sing did the infant Alexandra grow quiet:

"Hush, little witch, no need to cry,

You're the apple of my eye.

You're too small to charm a fly,

But you'll do magic, by and by.

Hush, little witch, please don't cry,

You've bewitched me, 'tis no lie.

You cast a spell, no need to try,

And you'll do magic, by and by.

Hush, little witch, don't you cry,

Don't be restless where you lie.

You can't Apparate or fly,

But you'll do magic, by and by.

*Hush, little witch, no need to cry,
Your eyes are closing, sleep is nigh.
And by the stars up in the sky,
You'll do magic, by and by."*

When she finished singing, the little witch's eyes were closed. She slept in Claudia's arms.

Alexandra pulled her face out of the Pensieve, and was quiet for a few moments. She realized that she had been humming along with Claudia's words.

"I know that tune," she said.

Ms. Grimm nodded. "It's a very old one. The Witch's Lullaby. Every child in the wizarding world knows it."

Claudia must have heard it when she was a child, Alexandra thought. Perhaps from her own mother or from Mrs. Prueett. Claudia, too, had been told that she would do magic, by and by.

"I don't want to hear any more self pity." Ms. Grimm picked up Galenthias, and held the cat in a way that was eerily similar to Claudia cradling her baby sister.

Alexandra willed the transformed animal to show a flicker of recognition, some sign of intelligence. Galenthias purred contentedly, eyes lidded and barely focused on anything, and flicked her tail.

"What is memory alchemy?" Alexandra asked.

Ms. Grimm blinked. "It's what it sounds like: the alchemical counterpart to the magic involved in Memory Charms. It's necessary for Pensieves, Remembralls, memory extractions like these..." She twirled the vial that had held the memory that was still swirling in the Pensieve between her fingers. "Alexandra, you're not paying attention to anything I'm saying, are you?"

Alexandra turned her face up to her aunt. "Yes, I am. I paid attention when you talked about memory alchemy." After a moment, she said, "I got your point. May I return to my room now, ma'am?"

The Dean sighed. "Write a letter to Claudia. You are not to ignore her. If she tells me that you are not answering her, I will send you home."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Making up the classwork you've missed is your responsibility. You'll need to work that out with your teachers."

"Yes, ma'am. One other thing?" Alexandra raised a hand to her snowy hair.

"Yes," Ms. Grimm said, "do something about that."

Alexandra dropped her hand and with a sullen expression said, "Yes, ma'am," and left the office.

Memory Alchemy

The Pritchards sneaked away from the Rashes that evening to meet with the rest of the Alexandra Committee in the library. Alexandra told her friends about everything: the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse; her father's visit; Bonnie's accident; the shocking truth about her mother; and finally, her adventures in Din~~o~~tah. Anna knew some of these details from the letter Alexandra had left for her, but by the time she finished her story, everyone was in shock.

David was the first to speak when she was done. "I can't believe Dean Grimm is your aunt."

"I can't believe your Ma's really your sister," Constance said.

"I can't believe Dean Grimm's familiar is... is..." Forbearance's hands were clutched to her chest, as they had been since Alexandra began telling her tale.

"My mother," Alexandra said.

"Oh, I hate that!" Forbearance said, wiping a tear from her eye.

"I can't believe you ran away to the Indian Territories to hunt for John Manuelito!" Anna said. "Please tell me that at least you realize it was probably the stupidest thing you've ever done?"

"Probably." Alexandra ran a hand through her hair. "So what does the Alexandra Committee have to say about all this? Besides that I'm stupid?"

"Well, the white hair is an... interesting look," David said.

Alexandra dropped her hand and narrowed her eyes at him.

After a brief silence, Forbearance said, "Actually, we've learned a lot while we was back home. You read our letter, right?"

Alexandra groaned. She'd completely forgotten about the letter the Pritchards had sent her. "There was a hidden message in it, wasn't there?"

"You don't mean to say you're still missin' your wand?"

"I have my wand. But I was pretty busy."

"Running all over the Indian Territories, fighting werewolves, and saving Muggles from Dark Wizards," Anna said.

Alexandra gave her a wan smile. "Yeah." To the twins, she said, "You do realize if I had stayed in Larkin Mills, I would have gotten in trouble for using an Unediting Charm anyway, because of the Trace?"

Constance and Forbearance both brought hands to their mouths.

"Oh, Alexandra, we'uns plumb forgot."

"We'uns hain't forbidden to work magic in our hollers."

"Must be nice," David muttered.

"So, do you want me to read it now?" Alexandra asked.

"Hain't no need now when we'uns can tell you direct," Constance said.

"We'uns saw the Grannies while we was home," Forbearance said.

"Forbearance asked 'em a passel o' questions 'bout the Stars Above," said Constance.

"You applicated 'em 'bout Powers," Forbearance countered.

"I didn't raise nothin' 'bout Alexandra."

"Wait," Alexandra said, "you talked to these Grannies about me?"

"We'uns can't lie to the Grannies, Alex," Constance said, a little guiltily.

Hesitantly, Forbearance said, "We'uns told 'em 'bout our attempt to draw down the stars on you."

Alexandra wasn't sure she liked this, but she shrugged. "And?"

"And..." The Pritchards looked at each other. "They'uns learned us another ritual."

"Okay, who are these Grannies?" David asked.

"They'uns is the oldest an' wisest witches in the Ozarks," Constance said.

Anna leaned forward. "The ones who've been teaching you wandlore?"

The twins lowered their eyes. "We'uns hain't s'posed to speak o' that."

"Why would a bunch of old women in the Ozarks care about Alex?" David asked.

Constance turned on him reproachfully. "Don't you disrespect the Grannies, David Washington! They'uns know lore our ancestors brought 'cross the ocean that hain't known to no one else in the Old World or the New. They know -"

"They knows an abundance o' things we'uns ought not speak of," Forbearance said softly, and her sister fell silent. "An' if we'uns live to be a hunnerd 'n one we might learn a smidgin of it. But they'uns taught us how to draw down the stars proper with Alexandra's Name."

"With my name?"

"Troublesome," Forbearance said.

Alexandra grimaced. "Okay, look, that Ozarker fairy tale you sang about me was cute the first time -"

"It hain't just a cute song, Alex. The Grannies says might could be your Name is Troublesome."

Alexandra closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Would you please tell me what that's supposed to mean?"

"Naming magic is special," Forbearance said.

"It's Ozarker lore," Constance said.

David cleared his throat. "Even Muggles have stories about names having magic properties. You're not claiming this is some kind of secret magic only Ozarkers know about, are you?"

Constance frowned at him. "I 'spect other folks know Naming magic, too, but that don't mean theirs is the same as ours."

"Why would the Grannies Name me anything?" Alexandra asked. "And why did they Name me after a girl named Troublesome who everyone hates?"

Forbearance shook her head. "You don't understand, Alex."

"Folks don't hate Troublesome," Constance said. "She's vexatious and wicked, but she hain't hated so much as -"

"Mostly, they pity her," said Forbearance.

"Oh, that's much better," Alexandra said.

Forbearance winced at Alexandra's sarcastic tone, but continued. "If'n you are Named Troublesome, it means you will be at the center of great works an' great calamities. There hain't been a Troublesome for a long, long time and the Grannies say it hain't good for there not to be a Troublesome in so long."

"Isn't Troublesome supposed to be an Ozarker?" Alexandra asked.

"Well," said Constance, "one 'spects so, but..."

"Everyone is Named somehow," said Constance. "Our tales is allus 'bout Ozarkers, 'ceptin' when they's some cymlin-headed or wicked foreigners..." Her voice trailed off.

"Nice," David said.

"So, great, I'm magically Named for a girl who causes nothing but trouble." Alexandra smiled thinly. "You think we can tell Dean Grimm this? Maybe I won't get in so much trouble if we explain that it's not my fault, it's how I was Named."

"I don't think that's how it works, Alex," Anna said.

"So, what, you want to repeat the Stars Above ritual?" Alexandra asked.

"If you come to them with your right Name, maybe they will speak to you," Constance said.

"And maybe they will tell you what you ought to do when all ills are set free," Forbearance said.

"That's from that song, right?"

The twins nodded, but they didn't share Alexandra's amused expression.

"Troublesome is there when things go badly awry," Forbearance said.

"Sometimes she causes it, sometimes she don't - 'ccordin' to the stories," Constance said.

"So do you really believe this? Seriously?" Alexandra could not help laughing. "I'm, what, an incarnation of some Ozarker fairy tale character?"

Constance and Forbearance's cheeks turned red, and Constance's voice rose indignantly. "That hain't what we're sayin'."

"You didn't even believe in any of this stuff before the winter break," Alexandra pointed out.

"But the Grannies -"

"Look, I don't mean to disrespect your Grannies. But what do you want me to do?"

"Let us perform another ritual," Forbearance said.

Alexandra frowned. "I'll think about it. I kind of have other things to worry about now."

Anna had been very quiet through most of the discussion. When she spoke up, she was upset and angry. "More important than you dying in seven years? Have you forgotten why we're all here in the first place?"

Alexandra tried to sound reassuring. "I do still have classwork to make up. And I have to talk Mr. Grue into letting me take his Advanced Potions class. And don't forget that John Manuelito is still out there."

David did a double-take. "Wait, what? You want to take Mr. Grue's class? You hate Mr. Grue."

"Doesn't everyone? But the only way I can learn memory alchemy is if I take his class."

Anna spoke again, after an uncomfortable silence. "You want to cure your mother."

"Of course I do."

"Didn't Ms. Grimm say the best Healers in the Confederation have already tried?"

"That doesn't mean they've tried everything. Or that there's nothing else that can be done."

"If your own father can't restore her memories..."

"Why are you trying to talk me out of this?"

Anna flinched, but she didn't look away. "I'm not. It just... honestly, Alex, it sounds like another one of your obsessions."

"One of my *crazy* obsessions, you mean? The ones where you all think I'm crazy until I turn out to be right?" Now Anna did look down. Alexandra's voice softened. "I could be obsessed with worse things than trying to find a cure to restore my mother's memories. So I'll be doing a lot more studying. It's not like running away to other Lands or the Indian Territories, right?"

"Well, that's true," Anna said reluctantly.

David pulled at his lip. "Alex, how much older than you is your mother? I mean your sister. Claudia."

She gave him an odd look. "She was twenty-two when I was born. Why?"

He shrugged. "Just trying to imagine what it would be like, growing up a Squib in the wizarding world."

"Don't you start. Ms. Grimm already gave me a lecture about how hard it was for Claudia so I shouldn't judge her so harshly for lying to me my entire life, since I'm the one who ruined her life."

An uncomfortable silence fell around the table again. Finally, Forbearance said, very meekly, "Alex, dear, are you *quite* sure that's what Ms. Grimm meant to tell you?"

She seemed prepared for an outburst. Everyone else did, too. Alexandra wondered when her temper had become so bad that her friends feared it, and she forced herself to speak evenly. "I just don't want to think about Claudia right now, okay? Do you mind if we go over what I missed in class the last three days instead?"

Anna agreed, relieved, and Constance and Forbearance gave her copies of their notes before hurrying off to avoid being caught by Benjamin and Mordecai. David remained to study with Alexandra and Anna, but he seemed troubled for the rest of the evening.

For the first time in her life, Alexandra had received a perfect report card, but Dean Calvert added yet another requirement for her to advance to a higher level in Magical Theory.

"You need Ms. Shirtliffe's permission," he said, as Alexandra stood before him in his office the next morning.

Caspar Calvert was a wisp of a man with a balding head and a long mustache, yet he was so serious and brisk that Alexandra never spoke less than politely to him. He seemed perfectly willing to dismiss her out of hand, and she knew trying to go over his head to Dean Grimm would end badly. He folded his hands on his desk and regarded her with watery blue eyes.

"The Schedule Change Request Form doesn't require a teacher's signature," Alexandra said carefully.

"I require the teacher's permission before I will sign it. Given your... reputation, Miss Quick, I am not going to inflict you on an unwilling teacher."

Alexandra fought down all the things she wanted to say to that, while the dean continued to regard her with that calm, self-righteous expression.

"I'll get her permission, sir. What about my other request?"

"The same. If you want to switch from Herbology to Potions, you'll need Mr. Grue's permission."

She'd been afraid of that. "Yes, sir."

She found Mr. Grue in his laboratory classroom during lunch. She was relieved that he had no students doing detention or extra credit work. He was flipping through a very large volume of hand-written notes and muttering to three magical quills at once, which were each adding notations to different scrolls. His dark eyes rolled in her direction for a moment as she entered the room, and his thick, bushy brows contracted just a little, but he didn't stop speaking. Alexandra stood a few paces from his desk and didn't interrupt him. Eventually he would have to acknowledge her, even if it was to order her out of the room.

She kept her face neutral as she studied the slate tabletops, burned and scored by years of alchemical mishaps, the racks of ceramic and glassware, the cracked and melted cauldrons piled in a corner, the tall, black iron cabinet, more impregnable than most bank vaults, in which Mr. Grue kept his more dangerous materials. Finally the teacher stopped muttering dictation and said, "If you want your hair color restored, Miss Quick, try pitch. I don't give out potions for cosmetic purposes and other vanities."

Wordlessly, she handed him her Schedule Change Request Form, with a handwritten line added to the bottom: 'Teacher's signature.'

He glanced at it and slid it back to her. "This is a puerile prank even for you. Get out before I send you to the Dean's office."

"It's not a prank, sir." This was possibly the first time Alexandra had ever said 'sir' to Mr. Grue without her voice dripping with bile and resentment. She was keeping all her bile and resentment carefully bottled up. She hadn't really expected the Alchemy and Potions teacher to simply sign the form without argument.

The expression on his ugly, ruddy face turned even uglier. "I was glad to be rid of you last year, and I'm sure you were glad to be rid of me. Mrs. Verde's Herbology class is where troublesome, distempered witches belong. Stay there and learn gardening and female cures. My classes require academic rigor."

Anger boiled inside her. Alexandra was close to erupting, and then she noticed something in Mr. Grue's scarred, malignant expression: his glittering eyes were studying her, as if she were a bit of alchemical substance being weighed on his scales.

"I have academic rigor," she said. "I got a perfect report card last semester. Mrs. Verde is a great teacher and I like her class. But I want to study Potions."

"Why in Merlin's name would I want you in my class?"

"Because I can be your best student. Sir."

He brayed laughter.

Alexandra said, "Do you want students who are there to learn, or students who just think potions are cool? I know you aren't looking for students who *like* you."

Mr. Grue scowled, but he didn't bellow at her. Instead he folded his arms and kept his voice level. "Why do you want to study Potions, if it's not because potions are 'cool'?"

"There are advanced topics I want to study in my junior and senior year. I looked ahead in the curriculum -"

"I'll wager that's the first time you've ever looked ahead at anything. Usually you do whatever enters your head without a second thought."

Alexandra bit down hard on another retort. Instead, she said, "If you enjoy insulting me so much, I'll promise to let you insult me all you like and I won't say a word back. Will that make you let me take your class?"

"Nothing will 'make' me let you take my class, Miss Quick. Answer my question. Why do you want to study Potions?"

She almost snapped that she'd been trying to answer his question when he'd interrupted her to insult her, but said instead, "I want to study memory alchemy."

Mr. Grue's face went suddenly blank. "Memory alchemy."

She nodded. "I've had... experience with it, now, and I want to understand how it works, how you can extract memories and store them, how to make Pensieves -"

"You want to cure your mother."

Alexandra froze, with her mouth hanging open. Mr. Grue's face remained as impassive as his tone.

"You know?" she said at last.

"Who do you think Diana brought her sister to first? I saw what your father did to Hecate."

Alexandra gasped. "My father?"

"He claims it was the Aurors. Diana says it was him. I wasn't there, but I believe her. She was my student."

"You taught Diana Grimm? But she wasn't a student here -"

Mr. Grue rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking about school. I trained her when I was an Auror."

"You were an Auror?"

"Do you need to repeat everything you hear before you understand it, or only what I tell you?"

Alexandra clamped her mouth shut, and clenched her fists.

"If Hecate Grimm's memories could be restored to her, I would have done so. We didn't stop trying even after she was brought here for Lilith to take care of her."

"You've known who my real parents were since I first came here?" Alexandra could barely keep her voice down. "Does every teacher in school know?"

Mr. Grue shrugged with infuriating indifference. "I doubt it. But you'd have to ask Dean Grimm who else knows. I never discuss her sister with anyone but her. I rarely discuss you at all."

Alexandra's fists squeezed tighter. "Will you let me join your class or not?"

"I just told you, your mother can't be cured."

"Because you tried and couldn't do it." Alexandra was pleased that this provoked him, even if it was counter to her purpose. "I notice a lot of people say anything *they* can't do is impossible."

"You arrogant little brat."

"Then let me try and fail so you can laugh at me."

Mr. Grue balled his own fists on the table and leaned on them as he studied her with an expression that was no longer indifferent, but full of mingled wrath and disgust. Then he grabbed the form Alexandra had brought to him, snatched one of the hovering quills out of the air, and scratched his name onto the paper. "If you cross me, all I have to do is fail you, and you'll never take a Potions class again."

Alexandra took the form. "Thank you, sir." She walked stiffly out of the room, feeling more angry and aggrieved than triumphant.

Ms. Shirtliffe turned out to be as difficult as Mr. Grue.

"Why should I let you switch to my class?" Ms. Shirtliffe was in the classroom she used to teach Advanced Magical Theory II. She shared a classroom with Mr. Adams and Miss Hart, teaching only a few of the advanced academic classes when not down in the gym. Alexandra now needed to beg her for permission both to join her class and to stay in the JROC.

"Because I studied my butt off all last semester to ace my classes and my SPAWNs just to get into this class," Alexandra said.

"Good work. What's that to me? You also ran away and played hooky for three days."

Alexandra clenched the Schedule Change Request Form in her hand. Somehow, it was harder to argue with a teacher she actually respected. Mr. Grue already hated her, so his contempt bothered her less. "I didn't play hooky, ma'am. If you've talked to Ms. Grimm, you already know that, and anyway, she's punished me."

Ms. Shirtliffe snorted.

"I don't see what my personal life has to do with whether or not I can take Advanced Magical Theory II," Alexandra said sullenly.

"Oh, now it's your personal life, is it?"

Alexandra wondered if Ms. Shirtliffe knew about her mother. She held out the form.

Ms. Shirtliffe studied her a moment, then took the form and signed it.

Alexandra cleared her throat. "Thank you. Um, about JROC..."

Ms. Shirtliffe handed the form back to her. Her expression hadn't softened a bit. "What about it?"

Alexandra stood a little straighter. "I'd like to stay in JROC, ma'am. Even if you demote me."

"Really? You want to stay in the JROC that badly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you'd better not miss any more drills or morning exercises."

Alexandra smiled. "No, ma'am."

"I'm disappointed in you, Quick."

Alexandra's smile faded. "I can tell you why I did it, if it matters, ma'am."

"I thought that's your personal life."

Alexandra closed her mouth.

"You're barred from the Dueling Club, of course."

Alexandra hung her head. She'd expected that, but it was still a disappointment.

"I was really hoping you'd go to the Junior Decathlon," Ms. Shirtliffe said.

Alexandra raised her head. "Why can't I? I won't still be on probation next year."

Ms. Shirtliffe snorted again. "I wouldn't put money on that. But even if you're not, you're going to miss a full semester of dueling practice."

"The Wizarding Decathlon is more than just duels. I read about the events. It's magical puzzle-solving and wandwork and potions and lots of different challenges."

"But you have to win duels, and only the Charmbridge Dueling Champions can go to the Territorial competition."

"So, I'll be Charmbridge Dueling Champion next year."

"You really think you're something, don't you, Quick? You think you'll be a match for everyone else after being out of practice for almost a year?"

"What makes you think I'll be out of practice, ma'am?"

Shirtliffe narrowed her eyes. "Dueling outside of school-sanctioned activities is forbidden."

"Yes, ma'am." Stiffly, Alexandra held up the form. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Dismissed." Ms. Shirtliffe shook her head as Alexandra left.

Alexandra wrote a very terse letter to Claudia, saying little more than that she was back at Charmbridge and she hoped her sister hadn't been too worried about her. In her mind, these words were dripping with sarcasm, though she wasn't sure she managed to convey that in her angry handwriting.

She was prepared for Mr. Grue to make her life hell in Potions class. Instead, he barely took notice of her. David was already lab partners with Ebenezer Smith, so Alexandra was the odd student out, and mostly worked by herself. Mr. Grue didn't force her to partner with anyone during their brewing and mixing assignments. Alexandra figured he hoped that she would fail faster being left by herself. For the first time, she actually went over her assigned readings before class. Between this and Mr. Newton's class moving on to Advanced Wards and Triggers, Alexandra was soon spending a great deal of time in the library again.

She was surprised one evening to discover Anna and David sitting alone at a table far from where Alexandra and Anna usually studied together. They were huddled on the third floor amidst stacks of old books between the Pre-Confederation American History and International Wizarding Law sections, and wore guilty expressions when they saw her looking in their direction.

"Studying anything interesting?" Alexandra asked Anna that night in their room.

Anna avoided Alexandra's gaze as she painted her nails. "David and I are just working on something for our Citizenship Projects."

After that, Anna and David frequently walked together in the hallway, whispered to one another in the cafeteria, and exchanged notes in class. Alexandra was amused by the way they averted their eyes when they saw her, but she began to feel a bit hurt that Anna continued to insist that they were just working on a project together. David ignored her hints when she tried teasing him about it.

On Monday morning, an owl came for Alexandra before breakfast. It was from Payton, which reminded her that the Charmbridge Winter Ball was that weekend. She read the letter while Anna finished showering, and was wearing an expression of dismay and confusion when her roommate came out of the bathroom.

"What's wrong?" Anna asked.

It was a long letter, filled with a baffling combination of apology, accusation, justification, and regret, but Alexandra's eyes scanned the most pertinent lines again. "I think Payton just broke up with me."

Anna paused in wrapping a second layer of robes around herself. "Really?"

Alexandra held out the letter for Anna to peruse. After a moment's hesitation, Anna took it. When she was done reading, she said hesitantly, "Well, you did kind of ignore him over the winter break."

"I was a little preoccupied."

"And, um, all last semester."

Alexandra sighed. "I know."

Anna sat down next to her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I mean, I did try to tell him that this wasn't going to last, but..." Alexandra didn't exactly feel like crying, but having her first boyfriend break up with her by owl was surprisingly disappointing.

"Big fat jerk!" Charlie said.

There was a knock on the bathroom door. Sonja shouted, "Are you dressed?" and then, after waiting only half a second for a response, opened the door. "Who's a jerk, Charlie?"

Alexandra folded the letter and stuck it in her desk drawer, as Charlie squawked Payton's name. She glared at the bird.

"Payton? Isn't he your boyfriend?" Sonja asked.

"Ex-boyfriend, now."

"Oh, no." Sonja hurried over to pat Alexandra on the shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Alex. Did you have a fight? No - never mind. You're right, it's none of my business." Her eyes sparkled eagerly.

When has that ever stopped you? Alexandra thought, but she satisfied Sonja's curiosity as they all walked to breakfast together. When they sat down to eat, Sonja said, "Well, we have to fix you up for the Winter Ball on Saturday." She eyed Alexandra's JROC uniform. "I think those uniforms look nicer on boys, honestly, but I'm sure there's some boy who doesn't have a date yet."

"Me and Anna can go without dates," Alexandra said. "Or not go at all. I don't feel much like dancing."

"Of course you don't, but it will be good for you -"

"You're worse than my sister." This reminded Alexandra that she owed Julia a letter, too.

"Don't worry, I'll fix you up. Both of you. If I can fix Carol up, I can get a date for anyone." Her own roommate was sitting down the table eating breakfast with some of the other quieter girls.

"Gee, thanks," Alexandra said.

"Please, don't," Anna said.

"Oh, fie," said Sonja, obviously paying them no mind.

While the JROC was doing broom drills that afternoon, Alexandra felt as if she were being watched. At first she assumed it was Ms. Shirliffe, but the teacher didn't seem to be paying her any more attention than usual. Alexandra tried to pinpoint what it was she was feeling. In the trees, crows were as usual cackling and filling the branches by the hundreds. But one larger, darker shape caught her eye. The black bird sat regally apart from the smaller corvids, none of whom dared to come near it, and Alexandra could feel its beady black eyes fixed on her even though it was too far away for her to actually see them.

"Quick!" yelled Ms. Shirliffe. "Quit daydreaming!" When Alexandra looked back, the bird was gone.

That afternoon, Alexandra surveyed Charmbridge's snow-patched lawn out the window of her room, and all through dinner, her distraction kept her disengaged from conversation. When they returned to their room, Anna asked, "Do you want to study tonight in the library?"

Alexandra shook her head. It hadn't snowed since before New Year's, but in the moonlight the grounds appeared white and barren.

"I'm going out," she said, putting on her cloak. In answer to Anna's questioning look, she whispered, "My father."

Anna turned pale. "If you get caught -"

"I won't. I'll have Charlie with me." Alexandra held out her arm. Charlie squawked and hopped onto it, and Alexandra opened the window to let the raven fly outside.

There was only a short time before curfew, but Alexandra was experienced now at sneaking in and out of the school. In January, few other students went outside, so she was careful as she slipped out the door. Charlie cawed and glided to her shoulder, and she began walking toward the tree line where she had seen Hagar earlier that day.

"You're supposed to go ahead and lead me to my father," she said to the bird.

Charlie made a jeering, cackling sound, just as Alexandra spotted a suspicious, luminescent glow through the trees.

"Charlie, go," she ordered, shrugging the raven off her shoulder. Reluctantly, her familiar took off and flew ahead. She held her wand at the ready as she crept forward into the trees.

Someone grabbed her arm and said, "Don't interrupt them. They're not done talking." Alexandra struggled briefly as she looked up into the face of the witch she'd seen in front of her house on Christmas Eve.

The woman brought a finger to her lips with her other hand. "Ssh." She winked.

"Who are you?" Alexandra whispered, but it was a very loud whisper. A dozen yards ahead, she was shocked to see Mr. Journey turn halfway toward her. His shoulders were hunched and his head was bowed and even from a distance she could see the shadows around his eyes. Then like mist, he was gone.

Alexandra jerked her wrist free of the woman's grip. With a glare, she backed away from her in the direction of the trees where she'd seen Journey.

The other witch nodded her head as if granting permission. Though her instincts fought against it, Alexandra turned her back on her. She held her head up haughtily as she marched forward. Her father was waiting for her.

"Charlie!" she called, without greeting her father. "Where are you? You're supposed to keep spooky witches from sneaking up on me!"

Abraham Thorn gestured, and Alexandra's eyes followed where he pointed. Hagar and Charlie were seated together on a high branch overhead. Charlie's hunched posture was remarkably similar to the cowed appearance of Mr. Journey.

"Alexandra," Charlie croaked.

"You knew I was here," her father said.

"Wasn't that the point of sending Hagar where I would see her?"

"Yes. But I couldn't be sure you'd seen her or would know what to do. I was afraid I've have to signal you more directly, but you are becoming quite perceptive. Tell me, did you only see Hagar, or did you sense her as well?"

Alexandra thought a moment. "I think I felt something before I saw her. I can't really say."

He nodded.

"Is that why Mr. Journey was here?" she asked. "Were you going to send him to bring me out?"

"If necessary."

"So you're friends again."

"I would not say that." There was an edge in her father's voice.

"He's the one you've had watching me at Charmbridge, isn't he?" When he said nothing, she asked, "Is he doing what you say out of guilt, or because you threatened him?"

"Both, probably. I'm not here to talk about Benedict."

"Are you going to introduce me to your girlfriend?"

Abraham Thorn paused, then said, a little stiffly, "When we are done talking. We have much to talk about, don't we, my daughter?"

"That depends. Is there anything I don't know yet that you're going to tell me?"

"I'm told you have finally learned the truth." Her father reached for her, but Alexandra stepped back. He went on speaking. "Alexandra, I placed a great burden upon Claudia, and she demanded only one thing: that if she were to be made your guardian, I would not interfere in her life or in her raising of you, until such time as you were called back to the wizarding world. I tried to warn her that that day was inevitable and that she couldn't avoid it by pretending, but... she's very stubborn, my eldest child."

"So you're putting all the blame on her."

"No, that's not what I meant."

Alexandra wasn't listening. Words rushed out of her in a burst of anger. "Claudia made everyone lie to me, Claudia kept you from seeing me, Claudia didn't want me to know what I was until she couldn't hide from it any longer. It sure is easy to say everything is Claudia's fault!"

"Alexandra -"

"I blame Claudia, all right, but I blame you, too! You abandoned me, just like you abandoned her and then let her be abandoned again by Livia's grandparents. She grew up a Squib knowing she wasn't wanted and that's why she hated me. Because I'm a witch. I was a burden on her. I kept her from going to medical school. Do you have any idea what you've done to all of us? All your children! Max and Julia and me and Lucilla and Drucilla and Valeria and Livia and Claudia - you just move from wife to wife to... to *lover* and leave someone else to take care of all your children and you think expensive presents and yearly visits to match the Inquisitors' visits make up for it! Even if you weren't the Enemy of the Confederation you'd be the biggest jerk in the world!"

Alexandra's voice had risen higher and higher, until she could probably be heard all the way across Charmbridge's lawns on the other side of the trees, assuming her father had not already cast a spell to prevent it. What had started as a rehearsed list of grievances, which in her head she had delivered to him coolly with righteous but controlled anger, had become, even to her ears, the shrill rant of an indignant child losing her temper and her self-control.

She stopped talking entirely when she realized that she was crying, and not just a few tears running down her cheeks but full-on sobs that shook her shoulders and choked her voice. She had to gulp air so she wouldn't double over. With the greatest effort of will, she remained erect and held her father off with a look of indignant fury. She could see he wanted to close the distance between them, and as much as she fought to deny it, she wanted to let him put his arms around her. Father-daughter moments like that weren't something she was accustomed to, not with Archie, and certainly not with Abraham Thorn. But she remembered Julia stepping into her father's embrace and knew that she must feel what Alexandra felt, an inescapable pull from this man who had barely been in their lives

and yet was a constant unseen presence they could not escape. But right now she was angry, and she wanted to stay angry.

Unfortunately, her anger only generated more tears. Her pride did no good against the tide of emotions that was carrying her along regardless of her wishes.

Abraham Thorn stood where he was. His pained expression betrayed more emotion than she could recall ever seeing on his face, even when she had railed at him over Maximilian's death.

It was Charlie who defied her wrath and the intimidating larger bird by descending from the trees to land on her shoulder. Alexandra started, and Charlie said "Alexandra," in a tone that was almost sad.

Alexandra laughed, still shedding tears. "Pretty bird," she said.

Then she noticed a shadowy figure standing in the trees at the edge of the moonlight. That woman was standing there listening to this whole thing. That made Alexandra furious, but it also helped her gather her wits and her self-control. She sniffed and kissed the top of Charlie's small, hard beak.

"Alexandra," the raven repeated.

"You stay right here, Charlie." Alexandra faced her father once more. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Her father didn't say anything.

"I hate you for making me that upset," she said. "I hate being emotional."

He offered her a wry, sad smile.

"I am so angry at you," she said. "I'm angry at all of you."

"Alexandra, there is much truth in everything you have said." Her father's voice was low and deep. "Except for this: Claudia does not hate you. I know that beyond any doubt. I will accept all your blame, I will plead guilty to every charge you have laid upon me. I have failed all of you, badly and in many ways. Claudia has made mistakes of her own. Yes, I know she suffers from her own hurts, much of them also to be laid at my feet, but that does not excuse her pulling her hat down over her head, especially where you were

concerned. She must answer to you for that. She may not have been a perfect guardian, my daughter... though I daresay you have hardly been a perfect ward. But do not accuse her of hating you. I will not hear that."

Alexandra panted in the cold air. Her tears were starting to freeze on her skin. She wiped her face again with her gloved hands, then remembered that she wasn't at home where she wasn't allowed to use her wand. She cast a Warming Charm on herself. Charlie preened, basking in the shared heat.

"What happened to my mother?" Alexandra asked. She paused, and jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the other witch. "Send her away."

"Don't be rude, Alexandra."

"It's all right, Abraham," said the woman. She melted back into the darkness.

After a moment of disapproving silence, Abraham Thorn said, "It was just after your birth. We had no refuge protected by a Fidelius Charm, unfortunately. I had thought to create such a place, a sanctuary for you and your mother, but she would not hear of it. She was already up and about. She was tired, of course, but Hecate wasn't about to let a little thing like childbirth relegate her to bed rest and away from our council. The Auror Authority was hunting for us, most of our allies had turned on us or gone into hiding themselves, and we knew that our coup, such as it was, had failed. We had no choice but to go underground ourselves. Everyone wanted to scatter, but we all worried about one of us being captured and betraying the rest. That is when I proposed the idea of using the Fidelius Charm to protect *us* directly."

"And making me the Secret-Keeper."

"Actually, that was Hecate's idea." Thorn chuckled. "So clever - I wasn't even sure it was possible until I cast the spell. I also cast the Circle of Protection then, the one that later saved you from Benedict's treachery. That was my idea."

He moved closer to her, slowly, like a man approaching a skittish animal. Alexandra did not like being regarded in such a manner. She didn't back away this time.

"Then everyone went their separate ways," her father continued. "None of us knew when we'd see each other again. Except Hecate and I, of course, and our daughter. We were going to hide in - well, it doesn't matter now. The Aurors, led by your accursed aunt, arrived literally moments before we were going to leave. I engaged them so Hecate could escape with you. If she had Apparated, she would have gotten away, but she had you in her arms."

"She was caught because of me?"

"An infant is no more likely to be splinched than anyone else traveling via Side-Along Apparition, but... Hecate hesitated. She loved you, Alexandra. She was actually a rather unsentimental woman, and she could be as ruthless as me, but where you were concerned, her maternal instincts were her undoing."

Alexandra was silent. Her father stopped an arm's length from her. "I could have dealt with the other Aurors easily enough, but Diana Grimm delayed me. I did not want to harm Hecate's sister."

"That didn't stop you on Croatoa."

"Much has happened since then, Alexandra."

"Diana says you Obliviated Hecate."

"Diana finds it convenient to hold me responsible for everything that happened to her sister. I would not blame her, except that her thirst for vengeance poisons the lives of my children as well." He laid a hand on her shoulder. He didn't pull her toward him, but he leaned closer. "Why would I do that, Alexandra? Why? Hecate would never have betrayed me."

"Maybe not willingly," Alexandra said quietly.

Abraham Thorn continued to stare at her. When he spoke again, it was in a very reasonable tone, as if they were discussing her homework. "I had already cast the Fidelius Charm, and once I had you, the Auror Authority could not have forced my whereabouts from her, not even with Legilimency or any other means."

Alexandra's mind was working hard, as difficult as it was under her father's gaze. What he said made sense, but she also couldn't

fathom why the Aurors would Obliviate Hecate when they surely wanted to question her.

Her father sighed. "Perhaps if I had not waited so long to reenter your life, you would not find it so easy to believe every vicious slander whispered in your ear about me."

"I do not." She was wondering if she really did know what he was capable of. "But you're right that you should have reentered my life sooner. And not let Claudia lie to me for fourteen years."

She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed when he dropped his arm and stepped away. He reached into a pocket. "I have a gift for you." He held out a gold coin in his black-gloved hand.

Alexandra took it from him. It appeared to be an ordinary eagle. "Thanks?"

"Really, my dear. Use your witch-sight."

She had already noticed an icy dread in her fingers that did not come from physical chill. It was a familiar sensation, though she wasn't sure when she had felt it before. But deduction and the memory of sensations she hadn't even realized she'd had at the time brought the sharp knife of comprehension stabbing into her brain. She gasped and almost dropped the coin. "This... is an obol!" She raised her eyes from the coin to her father, awe and horror on her face. "You made an obol!"

"Not an obol. A token."

"What? I don't understand."

He gently closed her fingers around the coin. "An obol must be given to an elf in payment for opening a doorway to the Lands Below or other realms. A token represents a payment already made. You can use it to cross the threshold between realms without aid."

Alexandra's breath caught in her throat. "Like the locket I brought back from the Lands Below?" She had never seen her father wearing it - she was sure he wouldn't dare wear it in front of her - but her brother's life had paid for their father's ability to travel between the lands above and the Lands Below.

"Yes."

The eagle lay in her hand, a cold weight she could feel even through her glove. "Maximilian had to die for me to bring back a token, and now you can just turn any old coin into a new one?" She pulled her hand out of his. "Who died to create it?"

His silence confirmed her suspicion. For a moment she thought about hurling the coin into the woods.

"I have not been able to hunt down John Manuelito," Abraham Thorn said in a cold and implacable voice, "but his associates were not beyond my reach. I sent them a message: who seeks to harm my children is my enemy."

Charlie warbled uneasily.

"I don't want anyone to die for me," Alexandra said.

Her father was unmoved. "You know I must sometimes do dire things. In this case, I needed to make an object lesson out of a few warlocks, for the sake of *all* my children who might otherwise be in danger. That I was able to turn one such object lesson to further advantage was merely convenient."

Merely convenient, Alexandra thought sickly. "I asked you to teach me more magic. So far, all you've done is hide my wand and give me something I don't want."

"You learned some things during your time spent wandless, did you not?"

"Not magical things." She paused. Was that true? "Anyway, I want to learn -"

"Spells. Great rituals. Forbidden arts."

"Yeah, stuff like that."

He caught her hand again and closed her fingers around the coin once more, squeezing until the grip was almost painful. "It took me a long time to break down the enchantments that went into the token you brought me and duplicate them. It is by no means an easy process. It is, in fact, a perilous and grueling one. This is an item of much greater worth than a broom."

"What am I supposed to do with this? Do you want me to go back to the Lands Below?"

"Merlin, no!" He leaned closer, and his hand squeezed tighter, until it felt as if the cold, dead weight of the coin were being forced into her very flesh. "Study it. Don't look away from me like that, daughter, and don't flinch from this thing because it reminds you of Maximilian. You want to learn great works? You have a great work in your hand. You say you want to learn forbidden arts. Do you think anything forbidden comes without a cost?"

"I don't understand," she said, willing her voice not to tremble. "I don't understand what it is you expect me to learn."

"Think on it."

Then he released her hand and laid his hand on her shoulder, and his voice became gentle again. "You should go back inside before you are discovered breaking your curfew."

"If you taught me to Apparate, I could get around faster."

"Indeed?" But he said no more.

As they walked through the trees, the black-haired woman slid out of the shadows to join them. She gave Alexandra a smile that was perfectly pleasant and showed not a trace of artifice, yet Alexandra felt an instinctive disliking for her.

"You have met Medea but not been introduced," Abraham Thorn said. "Medea, you know who this is, of course."

"It's a pleasure, Alexandra," Medea said. "You're the first of Abraham's daughters I've actually met." She held out a hand, which Alexandra took after a moment. "Your father talks about you often. From what he says, you're quite an impressive witch."

"So are Julia and all my other sisters," Alexandra said. *Except Claudia*. Did this witch know about Claudia?

"No doubt," Medea said. "Don't worry, Abraham speaks well of all his daughters."

Abraham Thorn and Medea stood side by side, but neither betrayed with a look or a touch any special affection. Alexandra considered

simply blurting out the question on her mind directly, but thought better of it. Her father had hinted that she'd pushed him far enough tonight. He had to know what she was thinking, so he might only be testing her. She met his gaze, feeling frustrated and resentful and trying not to sulk. *You're not going to get away with putting me off next time.*

His smile broadened, just a little, as if he had read her mind.

"When?" she asked.

Medea looked puzzled, but Thorn answered smoothly, "Not until some time after your birthday. But I will be thinking of you, and I promise it will not be too terribly long."

"I don't suppose you could undo this before you go?" Alexandra gestured at her head.

Her father raised an eyebrow. "I thought perhaps this was some new fashion among young witches." She couldn't tell whether he was teasing her or not. "So, you tested an Age Line. Well, how would it look if you walked outside with white hair and returned with black?"

"I'd think of an explanation."

"Think of a solution instead."

Frowning, she allowed him to kiss her cheek. Then he and Medea vanished, and Hagar squawked and flew away.

The Squib Laws

Alexandra wasn't sure what to do with the token. Maybe she should destroy it, or throw it into Lake Michigan the next time she was in Chicago. She considered keeping it a secret. But when she returned to her room, she told Anna about it. After being horrified, Anna wanted to tell Constance and Forbearance and David.

"Is there anyone else you'd like to tell about this extremely dangerous Dark object I'm carrying around?" Alexandra asked.

Anna sat in a throne-like wicker chair she'd brought to school to replace the simple hardwood chairs they were supplied with in their rooms, and in her elegant robes and fine braids, she had an almost royal air. "Well, we were talking about bringing Sonja into the Alexandra Committee. And Innocence is pretty smart, and she's as loyal to you as anyone. Of course she might want to bring that friend of hers, the chubby blond boy -"

Alexandra was aghast, until Anna's expression cracked and betrayed that she was teasing. "Alex, you know we don't gossip about you. We're seriously trying to help you, and we can do more research than you can alone."

"I know. But the more people who know about a secret -"

"I suppose that kind of thinking explains a lot of your father's actions." Anna's deadpan expression gave no hint that she was teasing this time. "Sonja and Innocence did help with the ritual to draw down the stars, and we'll need them again if we try another ritual like Constance and Forbearance want."

"Sonja does gossip about me."

"Not about important things. I'm just saying, think about it. I promise, we won't say anything to her without your permission. And Innocence will do anything you ask, even if you don't tell her anything, but she's as old as you were when you went to the Lands Below."

"That's not exactly a good argument."

Anna noticed she'd been twisting her braid in her fingers and released it. "Maybe not."

"Don't tell anyone else about the token, Anna. Not yet."

Unhappily, Anna nodded.

"Anyway..." Alexandra scowled. "I need to go talk to a rat."

Anna's eyes widened. "Was someone turned into a rat?"

"No," Alexandra said, "I think he's always been a rat."

She went downstairs to the basement the following evening, after waiting for Ms. Fletcher to leave. Ms. Fletcher was a much more active custodian and groundskeeper than her predecessor, the unfortunate Ms. Gale, and Alexandra suspected she was more observant of what went on in the basement, though she had yet to detect any new wards or alarm spells while sneaking down the stairs.

Alexandra walked in the opposite direction of the custodian's office, toward the dark passages that led to less-traveled areas of the basement. She entered a labyrinth of corridors and storage spaces and old, abandoned classrooms and hallways. Beyond the lamps of the main corridor, she cast a Light Spell. She passed a set of old wooden double doors and a sweating section of stone near a juncture in the secondary corridor she was traversing, until she reached a dead end.

She placed her hand on the fresh stone that blocked her path. Until last year, this corridor had gone on to join another one. If she were to circle around and walk through the basement past Ms. Fletcher's office and come at it from the opposite direction, she expected that she would find it blocked off on the other side as well. Between the two stone walls was a door, now sealed off, that opened to a narrow set of stairs leading down to the first sub-basement beneath this one.

Alexandra felt nothing through the stone. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against the wall. She concentrated for a moment, trying to feel any wards in or beyond it, but whatever the Charmbridge staff had done to make sure no students would magically bypass this barrier was too subtle or too far away for her still-rudimentary senses. But she didn't lift her head. She let her thoughts drift, with her eyes closed, and she mumbled something under her breath. It was not exactly a prayer, because she didn't believe in prayers, but it was a hope, and a plea, and she hoped Maximilian could hear it.

"What are you doing, Alexandra?"

Without opening her eyes, Alexandra said, "I had a feeling you'd find me. I'll bet you were following me since the moment I came down the stairs." She straightened and turned to face Mr. Journey. "You didn't call me 'Starshine.'"

The ghost's eyes didn't twinkle and he didn't smile. "I see you've been getting into trouble again."

"What? No I haven't - Oh." Self-consciously, Alexandra ran a hand through her white hair. "That wasn't here."

"So if I told Ms. Fletcher or the Dean you were down here, that wouldn't be a problem?"

Alexandra looked him in the eye and said coldly, "Does the Dean know you also report to my father?"

Mr. Journey's arms were folded, hiding the dark stain in the center of his chest. His eyes were nearly as dark and bloody for a moment, and she felt a chill emanating from him. Then his face was normal again, though still lined with disapproval. "I don't know. Why don't you ask her?"

"I don't like being spied on. I want you to stop telling my father everything I do."

"I'd be happy if I never had to speak to your father again, Alexandra, but I don't think he's going to give me much choice." His use of her name, instead of the old familiar nickname, gave Alexandra an unexpected pang. She'd almost become fond of the old ghost, would-be murderer or not, and she had done little but threaten him, much as her father had. Her father obviously intimidated him much more than she did.

"I'll ask him to leave you alone," she said.

Mr. Journey finally smiled slightly. "Well, good luck with that."

"You don't follow me around all the time, do you?"

"Of course not. I have other things to do, and I'm forbidden to walk the main floors except between midnight and dawn. But I still have my eyes and ears open, and you do get talked about, Starshine."

"Stop -" Just for a moment, there was a twinkle in the ghost's eyes, and Alexandra let her protest escape in a breath that misted the air in front of her.

"Did you come down here just to complain about something you know darn well neither of us can do anything about?" Journey asked.

She frowned and turned back toward the wall. "No. Not just that."

"Alexandra, you aren't trying to get into those sub-basements again, are you?"

"No. I was just curious to see what the wards look like."

"Curious, were you?" The ghost's voice was without humor again. "I think I really may have to report you to the Dean. Whatever you're up to can't cause anything but trouble."

"I'm not up to anything." She faced him again. "I swear - witch's honor - I have no intention of going down there again. I really was curious, and I had to see. I mean, I had to really see that there's no way anyone else can get down there."

Mr. Journey studied her, then said, "Well, then you'd better get back upstairs before Boudica or one of the elves sees you. And if I catch you sneaking around down here again, you'll be trying to talk your way out of it with the Dean, not with me. That's *my* promise."

"Got it." As she walked past him, she paused and said, "Thanks, Mr. Journey."

"Stay out of trouble, Starshine," he said, his voice mournful and fading as he dissipated as if in an unseen wind.

Anna and David were off working on their 'project' the next evening, so Alexandra studied alone in the library. Of course there were no books about obols, tokens, or the Lands Below, or at least none she had access to. But there were many books about enchantments, reverse enchantments, spell analysis, and Artificing. Studying mystical artifacts created by powers unknown went back to ancient Egypt, and probably earlier. Ptolemy had written what amounted to

the first textbook on the subject, and Bran had found her an English translation. Alexandra could barely understand it.

She foresaw an entire list of new classes she'd have to take, classes she could not fit in her schedule. Who would teach her these things?

No one. The thought came as a revelation, a daunting, disheartening one. Perhaps this was what her father intended, for her to realize that he wasn't going to tutor her in the ways of wizardry. Not unless she was prepared to leave Charmbridge Academy, turn her back on the Muggle world entirely, and follow him as Medea did, as Hecate had.

She slipped her hand into her pocket, feeling the cold, dead weight of the token. When her fingers touched it, a shiver went through her. There was magic there, magic that wrapped death in a tiny metal coin. How long would it take her to unravel that? And what would she achieve?

She didn't notice someone had approached her until she took her hand out of her pocket. It was like snapping out of a trance. Only then did she look up to see Mary Dearborn watching her intently.

Alexandra closed the book in front of her, carefully. "Do you want something, Mary?"

Mary whispered, "Is it true? You went after him?"

Alexandra looked around. No one else was in earshot.

"That's the rumor," Mary said. "You went to the Indian Territories and dueled John Manuelito."

"That's actually closer to the truth than most of the rumors I've heard," Alexandra said. "But he got away."

"You really went there to find him?"

Alexandra nodded, unnerved by how much Mary resembled her sister right now, with an eagerness hidden beneath her cold, detached front.

"Did he tell you anything? About Darla?"

Alexandra shook her head. "No. I'm sorry."

"What would you have done if he hadn't gotten away?"

Alexandra thought about her answer for a long moment. "I'd have made him pay for what he did... to me, and to Darla."

Mary's eyes didn't widen, but her pupils dilated just a tiny bit. "Would you have killed him?"

Alexandra wasn't sure what answer the other girl wanted. Or what her answer was. "I don't know."

Mary stood there, her mind seemingly elsewhere. Then she slowly reached into her purse, which was bulging and stretched at the seams with something large and flat forced inside it. It took her a couple of tugs to withdraw a familiar object. She set the mirror on the table in front of Alexandra.

"You really shouldn't deal with hags," she said. "Didn't your parents tell you that?"

"No," Alexandra said, her voice a little strained.

Mary's mouth formed a little bow. "Oh. I forgot you were raised by Muggles." She said this in an artless way that made the condescension seem less offensive. "Well, you shouldn't. Everyone knows that." She turned and walked away. In the mirror, Alexandra's reflection clasped her hands under her chin as if delighted by their reunion, smiling with rosy red lips and emerald green eyes. Even her white hair became frosty and beautiful.

Alexandra threw herself back into her studies. She did her homework diligently. She read the literature HAGGIS sent her and checked out books about hags, knowing she still had to complete her Citizenship Project. She attended JROC drills and followed Ms. Shirtliffe's every command. In the evening, she continued using what time wasn't spent on homework studying other things. The magic of unraveling enchantments and duplicating spells, the magical theory behind Apparition, the Arithmancy of lightning strikes. She even read the textbooks for more advanced Charms classes looking for Disguise spells. This was all added to the books she was reading about the magic of thought and memory.

Aside from Anna, she spent little time with her friends. She realized she'd barely exchanged a word with David since the night after her return until he caught her after Potions class one day.

"Remember what I asked you about in December?" he said.

"Asked me about what?" Mr. Grue had ended the class by giving them more homework than Alexandra had in all her other classes put together. She knew he was hoping she would fail, but he was going to have to try harder than that. Already she was thinking about the compounds and synthesizing formulas she'd have to work out on her own. Anna was much better than Alexandra at Arithmancy, but she was no longer much help with Potions -

"Are you ignoring me on purpose or because you're thinking about something more important?" David's annoyed voice intruded on her thoughts, and Alexandra realized she had no idea what he'd just said.

"Sorry," she said. "What did you ask me about?"

He rolled his eyes. "Dueling. You said you'd teach me to duel."

"Join the Dueling Club. It's the start of the semester."

"I don't want to quit Quidditch. And I don't want to start out as a total beginner in front of everyone else."

"So you want personal lessons so you can keep playing Quidditch and so you won't have to get beaten in public." She softened her tone a bit. "I actually do need to practice dueling, since I can't join the Dueling Club myself this semester, but I need to practice with someone who's good."

"Thanks a lot."

"If I find someone else to practice with, you can come, too."

They walked on, and just before reaching their next class, David said, "Do you have a date for the Winter Ball yet?"

"Not really. Sonja's been trying to fix me up with Abel Horschack or Corey McCluskey but..." She wrinkled her nose. "Do you?"

"No." He put his hands in his pockets. "So, um, want to go?"

Alexandra did a double-take. "With you?"

"Yes, with me." He looked annoyed again. "I'm not asking you on a *date*."

"Well, technically, you are."

"Do you want to go with me or not?"

"I thought you might ask Anna," Alexandra said carefully.

"Anna? Why Anna?"

"You've been hanging around a lot together."

For a moment, David's eyes slid away from hers. "Me and Anna are just friends, Alex, you know that."

"Like you and me."

"Yeah, exactly."

"Just so we're clear -"

"Just friends."

"There wasn't anyone else you could ask?"

David's expression turned glum. "If it matters, me and Dylan asked Constance and Forbearance first. They felt bad about it, but they have to go with the Hayseed Twins."

"Nice to know I'm your last resort."

"Hey, I don't see a bunch of guys lining up to ask you."

"How could I refuse such a romantic invitation?" Despite her tone, Alexandra found the banter with David came easily. This was something they could talk about that wasn't life and death.

"Is that a yes?"

She considered. "All right. It's a date."

David cleared his throat. "One other thing. Any chance you could talk Anna into going with Dylan?"

In the incredulous silence, the bell for the next class rang.

"He needs a date, too," David said.

"Then he should ask her." Alexandra grimaced. "I'll warn her first."

On Friday afternoon, Alexandra returned to her room from her JROC dress uniform inspection to find a large, black owl sitting on the windowsill. Anna was untying a scroll from its leg, and fumbled nervously when Alexandra entered, causing the owl to make an ominous keening sound accompanied by a threatening snap from its beak.

"I'm sorry," Anna mumbled, pulling the scroll loose. The owl gave Alexandra a baleful look, then dismissively turned its back and spread its wings, soaring away without waiting to collect an owl treat.

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie, who had been very still and quiet while the owl was present.

"Inspection go all right?" Anna asked, while sliding the scroll into her sleeve. Alexandra caught the gleam of an embossed seal before it disappeared.

"Colonel Shirliffe didn't say anything, which meant my uniform is as close to perfect as it can be." Alexandra carefully removed her jacket. She wanted to keep everything pressed, creased, and polished to perfection for the ball on Saturday night. "What's up?"

For a moment, she thought Anna would feign ignorance, but the other girl was terrible at subterfuge. "Nothing. I requested some documents."

Alexandra had guessed the black owl was an official government owl. Owl Post owls always expected treats, and Jingwei, whom Anna would have sent for a really important errand, was up in the aviary. Alexandra waited expectantly.

"If I ask you not to ask questions, will you be angry?" Anna asked.

Alexandra hung her jacket up and paused before unbuckling her belt. "No." She couldn't refuse Anna the right to keep secrets. "Does this have to do with your 'project' with David?" She'd been guessing, but she saw by Anna's reaction that her guess was correct, and now she was even more curious. "You will tell me eventually what all this is about, won't you?"

Anna nodded. "Yes."

"Okay." Alexandra removed the rest of her uniform, and tried to put the secret of the scroll and her friends' strange behavior out of her mind.

On Saturday, the floors throughout the academy were clean enough to eat off of and polished like glass. All the utilitarian lamps with their ugly metal baskets had been replaced by magical moon-bright globes or elegant candelabras, and a fine red carpet lay along the corridor leading to the auditorium which, for the Winter Ball and other dances, became a ballroom.

Younger students didn't usually attend the Winter Ball, but for freshmen and up, it was one of the major events of the year, and certainly the most formal. Witches wore their finest robes or dresses, and boys wore fine robes, except for Palatines and Ozarkers and a few other Old Colonials, who wore suits. Alexandra avoided the robes-or-dress question by wearing her formal JROC uniform. The only concession she made to femininity was a pair of earrings that had been another gift from Julia.

She stood in front of her magic mirror, checking herself out in her button-up jacket and over-the-shoulder cape. The mirror made fun of her by exaggerating her serious expression into one of mock severity, scowling at her with upturned lower lip. Behind her, Anna tightened the braids coiled above her ears, then thrust lacquered wooden sticks through the braids.

Alexandra considered her mirrored reflection. Makeup did not become her while wearing the JROC uniform - indeed, that was one of the reasons she preferred it - but the mirror was still able to show how her features could be set off to their best advantage regardless of what she was wearing, and it now enticed her with a little added sparkle to her eyes, some gloss on her lips, and a hint of color around her cheekbones. These were all simple charms Julia had taught her. She touched her wand to her lips and then carefully

touched up her eyes, cheeks, and eyebrows, adjusting her appearance until the mirror was no longer showing her what could be and instead what was. Alexandra nodded, and her reflection smiled in satisfaction.

"Stop looking so smug," Alexandra said. Her reflection winked at her.

"Pretty bird," said Charlie. The raven was admiring its own reflection in the mirror, which obligingly preened and displayed feathers so glossy black that they were iridescent.

"You know, that white hair makes you look like an old lady from behind," Anna said. "I can't believe you haven't fixed it yet."

"I think I'll just let it grow out," Alexandra said.

"You're being stubborn."

Alexandra turned to her. "Why don't you use one of those glossy hair charms everyone else is using? You'd look really pretty with that polished lacquer look."

Anna smiled. "You think so?"

"Definitely." Alexandra looked in the mirror again. Her snow-white hair was carefully straightened and parted. "I'd just look like my head was covered with frosting."

"You'd look prettier in robes, but then people might mistake you for a girl." Anna waved the extended sleeves of her own bright amethyst robes and grinned.

Sonja knocked on their door, and entered leading Carol by the hand. Carol squinted, her face transformed with Makeup Charms and the removal of her glasses. Sonja had made over her mousey roommate and now examined Alexandra and Anna critically. Alexandra took in Sonja's red hair, styled in fiery glowing curls, matched by brilliant ruby earrings and bright red lips.

"Anna, you're adorable," Sonja said. "Alexandra - well, you look fine, too. Why won't you let me dye your hair if you can't undo that Age Line curse?"

"Too late now," Alexandra said.

"True. Come on, the boys are waiting downstairs."

As she usually did when engaged in social interactions that she found trying and not altogether comfortable, Alexandra allowed Sonja to act like the leader of their little clique for the evening. Downstairs, students were streaming out of the residence halls in a colorful spectacle of fancy robes, scarves, shawls, and cloaks and here and there, hoods, headscarves, bonnets, and hats. Alexandra nodded to her fellow JROC members. It wasn't required for them to wear their dress uniforms to the Winter Ball, but everyone did. Charlotte Barker, she thought, filled out the JROC shirt, jacket, and trousers much better than she did, and some of the boys were almost - she struggled for the word. Dashing? Handsome? She didn't like either term, with their connotations of a physical appeal that she was unwilling to allow she felt for any of her fellow students. Even the ones who looked much better in tight trousers than loose robes.

"Alex?"

Alexandra jerked her head around to face David. "What?" She almost ran a hand through her hair, until she remembered how carefully she had straightened and arranged it. She eyed his robes, defiantly patterned in red and black and orange print when the fashion for boys was plain, solid colors. "Nice."

"Thanks," he said uncertainly. He offered an arm, and she took it and joined him in the line to enter the ballroom. Anna and Dylan followed behind them. Dylan had given Anna a corsage which did not match her robes at all.

The Winter Ball was an elegant affair, by Charmbridge standards, though Alexandra could not help comparing it with the cotillions she had attended in Roanoke. There, Julia had made her dress in robes that would have befitted Anna and Sonja's tastes. The Old Colonial witches and wizards (and New Colonials dressed like Old Colonials) glided across the dance floor and whispered and laughed and flirted beneath magically floating candles, attended by unobtrusive servers and house-elves, entertained by magic orchestras much more accomplished than the Charmbridge magic band which played for the student body tonight. Remembering the pomp of those adult events made Alexandra very conscious that the Winter Ball was just kids playing dress-up. And yet, everyone took it very seriously, even the teachers, some of whom Alexandra suspected of longing for the

days of cotillions and arranged marriages. Dean Cervantes wore flashy green and yellow robes with ruffled trim, making his wife look drab next to him, and Dean Grimm was wrapped in silky black that reflected no light, giving her face and hands a disembodied look.

Alexandra watched Sonja fall a step behind Stuart Cortlandt, just before he led her onto the dance floor, and wondered if the sophomore was aware that Sonja had a serious crush on him. Stuart was from a pureblood Old Colonial family. Alexandra wasn't sure what Sonja's blood status was; she had never asked, and Sonja had never volunteered it.

Blood status wasn't supposed to matter anymore, but few purebloods partnered with non-purebloods. Larry Albo held court with his group of Old Colonial friends, like a little coven of the Elect.

"So, we gonna dance?" David asked.

"You're supposed to lead, dork," Alexandra said

He took her hand and drew her awkwardly to him, sliding an arm around her waist. She was comforted by the fact that a few feet away, Dylan and Anna looked even more awkward. By the end of the dance, she and David had both relaxed a little, while Anna still bore a resemblance to a trapped bird in Dylan's embrace.

"Whoa," David said.

"What?" Alexandra looked in the direction he was gazing. Students were still trickling into the ballroom. Two couples had just entered: matching pairs of Ozarkers. Benjamin and Mordecai Rash were absolutely identical in coarse, old-fashioned dark suits with top hats. Their gaits were as stiff as the arms they held out for their dates, but Alexandra could not deny there was a certain dignity in their bearing. One of the Pritchards wore a yellow dress and bonnet and the other wore blue. They had obviously been acquired just for the ball, as they were far fancier and more decorative than anything the twins wore normally. Their bonnets were downright skimpy, actually allowing a few curls of blonde hair to be seen. By Ozarker standards, they were dressed quite daringly, and the Rashs did not exactly look displeased. Constance and Forbearance were lovely, and David wasn't the only boy staring at them.

"She looks *good*," David said.

"They both do," Alexandra said.

"Uh, yeah." David remembered who was holding his arm. "You look good, too, by the way. Even with the white hair."

"Work on your timing and your delivery." She nudged him with an elbow. "Want me to challenge the Rashes to a duel? While they're distracted, you can ask one of the Pritchards to dance."

He rolled his eyes. "Knock it off."

For the rest of the evening, Alexandra alternated between dancing with David and talking to Anna (who only danced the first two dances with Dylan before gratefully giving him permission to dance with another girl). A couple of the older JROC mages, including Mage-Sergeant Major Daniel Keedle, made a point of dancing with each of the witches in the corps, and everyone whistled and cheered when he took Witch-Colonel Shirtliffe for a spin around the dance floor. The senior, soon to graduate, bowed with all the formal dignity of an Old Colonial warlock, and Ms. Shirtliffe returned his bow rather than allowing him to kiss her hand. Then Daniel held out a hand to Alexandra, and trying not to look startled or embarrassed, she took it.

No sooner had the Mage-Sergeant Major released her than Torvald Krogstad grabbed her shoulder. "How about a dance, Troublesome?"

"Are you asking me?"

Torvald pulled her onto the dance floor. Alexandra thought about stomping on his foot - her JROC boots had nice hard heels - and settled for a glare. Unfazed, he encouraged her to join him in spinning to the wizard rock the band was playing. As she reluctantly did so, she caught sight of David and Dylan advancing on Constance, Forbearance, Benjamin, and Mordecai. *Oh crap*, she thought, *please don't start a fight*.

A bump almost knocked Alexandra off her feet, and she paid attention to Torvald again. The music ended, and Alexandra couldn't see where David and the Ozarkers were.

Torvald leaned close to her. "Another dance? Since your date has abandoned you?"

"He -" Alexandra had no desire to make excuses for David to Torvald, but the older boy was making her nervous. Much to her surprise, she had kind of enjoyed the dancing. But once was fun. She wasn't sure what two implied. "No, thanks. Maybe later."

She was puzzled when Torvald looked genuinely disappointed, but shocked when he planted a kiss on her lips. He held it for a moment, before letting go of her hands and stepping back.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"To say I did it and got away with it, of course." He grinned. "You've quite a fearsome reputation, Troublesome. I'll bet everyone's wagering right now whether you're going to pull out your wand and hex me. Including the teachers."

Alexandra could feel blood rising past her neck. "Not in the middle of the ballroom with half the school watching me, I won't."

"You didn't pull away." He took his leave with a wink and a bow.

"Yeah, go harass someone else!" she said in a loud voice.

She was surprised and amused to see David and Dylan dancing with the Pritchards. When the dance ended, Constance and Forbearance returned to their dates, but they held their heads up and met the Rashes' scolding with cold stares until the boys closed their mouths. During the long ballroom dances, the Ozarkers danced together, and Alexandra thought that while Benjamin and Mordecai were indisputably jerks, there seemed to be a real gentleness in the way they treated Constance and Forbearance that wasn't always apparent when they were arguing or remonstrating with them.

David danced the last dance with her, but he was distracted, and his eyes were not on her.

"Is it Constance or Forbearance you keep staring at?" Alexandra asked. "Or is it this weird thing guys have for twins?"

"Knock it off, Alex."

She stopped teasing him. They were dancing a slow dance, and it was past midnight so everyone was tired. Even the music from the band had a sleepy quality to it. Everyone's arms rested more heavily

on their partners, and among the more affectionate couples, there were heads leaning on shoulders and even (when no adult was looking) kissing. Here and there Alexandra caught glimpses of roaming hands. Even under the baleful gazes of deans and teachers, teenagers would behave amorously, and Alexandra had heard plenty of gossip about what went on completely beyond the adults' sight.

She looked at David, and found him watching her for once.

"Remember when I kissed you in seventh grade?" she said.

He snorted. "Of course I remember. Your brilliant plan to make Angelique jealous. I thought your brother was gonna kill me."

She laughed. Then she leaned closer to him, and after hesitating for a moment, put her lips against his. He tensed, almost as he had on that previous occasion two years earlier, but then he kissed her back. Awkwardly. After a couple of seconds, they pulled away.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"I felt like it." Her hand was on his upper arm, and she squeezed it. Not that she'd really thought she was attracted to him, but remembering Torvald's kiss and seeing all the other couples had put thoughts in her head, and the lateness of the hour had made her impulsive. But she realized guiltily that she had probably completely confounded him. "Are you upset?"

"No." His hold on her tightened, just a little. "But don't do that again."

"Okay." She wasn't entirely certain why she had done it. The dance ended, and Ms. Grimm thanked the band and the faculty and bid everyone return to their rooms. Clockworks were lining up to clear away the décor and furniture, and Alexandra knew elves would appear once the students were gone.

Everyone filed out of the ballroom. Alexandra caught her aunt watching her as she walked arm in arm with David out into the corridor that spilled students into the main hallway and thence to their residential halls. She wanted to wait for Anna, but the press of students was so great that it was easier to just continue on to the stairs and intersections where boys and girls separated. She and

David stopped at the stairs leading up to the freshmen girls' dorms and waited for their friends to catch up to them.

During a brief lull in traffic, David said, "You know you're a pureblood, right?"

"What?"

"Think about it."

This was something that simply had not occurred to her. Alexandra had arrived at Charmbridge as a Muggle-born, then learned that she was a half-blood because of her father. She was even recorded as a half-blood on the official Confederation Census.

Someone falsified those records, she realized suddenly.

She shook her head. "Maybe I am, technically, but don't call me that."

David gave her a reproachful look.

"I'm not sure what to do yet," she said. "I mean, if I call myself a half-blood, I guess I'm kind of lying, but if I say I'm a pureblood, I have to explain about my mother. Why should I have to explain anything to anyone? Anyway, why do you care about blood status so much all of a sudden?"

David shuffled his feet nervously. "There's something Anna and I have been wanting to talk to you about."

Just then, Anna appeared with an indignant expression. Dylan followed her, looking sheepish.

"Anna," David said, "I was waiting for -"

"Not now." Anna pointed at him accusingly. "Your roommate is a jerk!"

"Tell me something I don't know." David held up his hands. "Whatever he did, it's not my fault."

"What did you do?" Alexandra asked Dylan.

"Nothing!" Dylan protested.

"He's grabby! And he tried to kiss me!" Anna pulled the pins out of her hair with a savage gesture, as if she were contemplating sticking them into Dylan. He took a step back. "I'm going to my room." She stomped past Alexandra and David, with her hair falling loosely around her shoulders.

Alexandra narrowed her eyes at Dylan. He gave her a bashful, not-very-contrite smile. "Everyone else kissed their dates good-night."

Alexandra pointed a finger at him, as if she might curse him without even using her wand, and then dropped her hand in disgust. "Good-night, David." She followed Anna upstairs.

By the next morning, Anna was in a better humor, and assured Alexandra that she didn't need Dylan cursed. Nonetheless, they both gave Dylan scathing looks in the cafeteria at breakfast.

Alexandra listened idly to half-heard snatches of gossip from the other girls. Sonja had not come to early breakfast, so Janet and Lydia were talking about how late she was rumored to have returned to her room and trying to pry details from Carol, who professed ignorance and said only that Sonja was still asleep.

David separated himself uncomfortably from his roommate and sat next to Alexandra and Anna. "So, can we talk after breakfast?"

"About what?" Alexandra asked, and saw a look pass between David and Anna.

"Not here, and not in the rec room," David said.

"The library," Anna said.

"Okay." David nodded. "By the way, I'm sorry if Dylan was a jerk. I mean, it wasn't my fault." He flinched as Anna slashed open a melon with her knife. "But I did ask you to go with him to the ball."

"Yes, you did." Anna stabbed a melon slice with her fork.

"So, uh, I'll see you in the library." David slid down the bench, back to where Dylan and the other boys were sitting. Dylan gave them a little wave. Anna ignored him.

"I could still curse him," Alexandra said.

"Don't worry about it." Anna's mind seemed to be on something more serious. Alexandra curbed her questions until they left the cafeteria.

They were almost the only students in the library on this Sunday morning after the Winter Ball. David joined them a few minutes later, still a little sheepish. Even though the library was virtually empty, Anna cast a Muffliato spell before they said anything else.

"This isn't about you two, is it?" Alexandra asked.

Her friends shook their heads. David said, "Actually, it's about your mother. I mean, your sister."

"Claudia?" Alexandra frowned.

"You know I was doing a lot of research about the Confederation Census for my Citizenship Project - blood status, laws about Muggles and Muggle-borns, and so on."

"Yeah." The way her two friends were looking at her - the way you look at someone you're about to dump some horrible piece of information on - gave her an uneasy feeling of d💎j💎 vu. "What does this have to do with Claudia?"

"Old Colonials used to believe all kinds of crap about pure blood," David said. "It's never been illegal in any Territory for wizards to marry Muggles, but they used to put so many restrictions on wizards and Muggles living together, and where their children could live and go to school, they might as well have forbidden it. Like, the unofficial official policy was to make life hell for Mudbloods."

Anna nodded. "Most of the laws are gone, but a lot of the attitudes are still there." Anna had cause to know this. Her childhood as a half-blood growing up in a proud, pureblood wizarding community had not been easy.

"Claudia grew up a pureblood. Until..." Alexandra's brow wrinkled.

"You know if there's anyone purebloods despise more than Mudbloods, it's Squibs," David said.

Uncomfortably, Alexandra said, "I know that's why the Pruetts wouldn't take Claudia in or acknowledge her as a relation. So what's your point, that she had a miserable childhood and having to raise her sister who was technically a pureblood was really hard for her? I know that. It sucked to be her, but -"

"This isn't really about you, Alex," Anna said quietly.

Alexandra had been preparing to deflect another round of lectures about poor Claudia. She was tired of hearing that from her aunts and her father. But reluctantly, she stopped talking and let Anna and David continue.

David said. "They used to have what were called the Squib Laws."

"Squib Laws?" Alexandra had never heard of these.

"It had to do with what purebloods believed about *breeding*," David said. "If wizards having children with Muggles was bad, what do you suppose having a Squib meant?" Alexandra didn't say anything, so he went on. "A Squib meant bad blood, and worse, they thought Squibs would make any children they had Squibs, or anyone who had children with their children, etcetera. If you read some of the stuff Old Colonials wrote back in the nineteenth century, you'd think Squibs were gonna doom the entire wizarding world."

"That's crap," Alexandra said.

"Of course it is, but they believed it." David lowered his voice, despite the spell already protecting their conversation. "They passed laws to prevent it."

Alexandra felt her uneasiness growing. "What kind of laws?"

"Laws against Squibs marrying wizards or anyone with known wizarding blood. Laws against Squibs living in wizard communities. Seers and Astrologers claimed they could predict whether a child would be a Squib, and Alchemists and Herbologists and other shady types sold... preventions, and there were stories that some Squib children, or suspected Squib children... well, seems there was quite an infestation of Erklings and Redcaps in North America for a while. And then, funny, it's like they all just vanished when it stopped being fashionable for Squib children to disappear."

"In China, they didn't even pretend," Anna said quietly.

"The worst here is when they actually passed a law making it illegal for Squibs to have children," David said.

Alexandra didn't like the sound of this, or David and Anna's shared tension. "How -?"

"There's a spell called the Barrenness Curse," Anna said.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Alexandra asked, appalled.

"By the 1950s or 1960s, it wasn't really done anymore," David said. "But the laws were still on the books in some Territories until the Eighties. Your father was actually one of the Congressmen who helped abolish them for good."

"What does this have to do with Claudia? If they didn't do it anymore -"

"The laws were still on the books," David repeated. His eyes flicked uneasily to Anna.

Anna slid a scroll out of her sleeve. "I sent a request to the Confederation Census Office. They used to administer the Blood Status Regulation Commission. Of course they're not going to just admit they used to do things like that, or send records of who they did it to. I had to practice my Editing Ink Charm a lot to duplicate my father's seal."

It took a moment for that to sink in. "You forged an official request from Congressman Chu?" Alexandra was both shocked and impressed by her friend's audacity.

Anna unrolled the faded scroll and pushed it across the table to Alexandra. "You realize, if he ever finds out, he'll kill me. I mean, he'll literally kill me. Ava-you-know-what."

"I don't think so," Alexandra said, but Anna's face was white and showed no trace of humor. Alexandra laid her hands on the scroll to keep its wrinkled edges from rolling up, and read the official Blood Status Regulatory Action under the authority of Confederation Law 843 Article 6.

Confederation Law 843 was one of the so-called 'Squib Laws' - specifically, it provided for 'Necessary measures to prevent continuation of non-magical bloodlines of wizarding issue.'

The report was written in similarly opaque bureaucratese. Using so many words to obfuscate what they were doing, Alexandra thought, could only mean that everyone knew that what they were doing was too horrible to talk about openly, even if it was legal.

What had been done, twenty-four years ago, was that fourteen-year-old Claudia Quick, a registered Squib, had been administered the Barrenness Curse. The authorizing signature was Elias Hucksteen, then the Governor of Roanoke.

~~~~~

## Bamboo Wands

"They *sterilized* her?" Alexandra was trying to come to grips with what she felt. A complicated mix of rage and guilt. She still couldn't quite forgive her erstwhile mother for all her lies, but Claudia had suffered so many terrible wrongs, it was becoming harder to stay angry at her.

Alexandra had wondered occasionally, before she found out about her father, why she didn't have any siblings. She had never asked Claudia or Archie, because as a child, she wasn't sure she wanted a baby brother or sister.

"I haven't been able to find out much about the Barrenness Curse, other than what it does, obviously," Anna said. "It's not described in any books here in the library."

Alexandra tried to imagine being taken by strangers and cursed to never have children. She had never thought much about the idea before; it was so hypothetical and far-away, certainly not something she was interested in for the foreseeable future. But she would definitely be furious if someone else decided that for her.

How had Claudia felt about it? Had she understood what was being done to her? Did they explain it to her? Did it hurt?

"Why?" Alexandra asked. She clenched her fists as Anna and David watched her, with very serious expressions.

"We don't know," Anna said. "It was almost never done by that time, at least not by the Census Office. Though there are rumors that pureblood families still did it sometimes to their own Squib children."

"Bet they still do," David said with disgust.

Anna looked at him uneasily. "Some families protected their Squibs, though. My father says, back in China sometimes there were wizards who had what's called a bamboo wand."

"A bamboo wand?" Alexandra was sure she'd heard that term before. Yes - Larry had said something about a family member with a bamboo wand last year.

"They didn't literally have bamboo wands, of course. You can't make a wand from bamboo. They'd carry a real wand. But everyone would just pretend not to notice that whenever there was magic to be done, someone else would do it. Anyway, some families here in the Confederation have been known to do that, too, and American wizards even borrowed the euphemism." Anna shrugged. "But only a powerful and influential family could get away with hiding someone with a bamboo wand. Not all of them would do that."

"So the families who are influential enough, and willing, let their Squibs live with them in the wizarding world," Alexandra said slowly. "And the rest kick them out after sterilizing them."

"Not anymore," Anna said.

"Supposedly," David said. Anna didn't argue.

Alexandra looked at the illicitly-obtained report again. "What was Claudia doing in Roanoke?"

The question puzzled her friends.

"Claudia grew up in Chicago," Alexandra said. "Elias Hucksteen wasn't the Governor-General back then. He was just Governor of Roanoke. How could he have a Squib in Central Territory given the Barrenness Curse?" But the scroll in front of her clearly reported that Claudia Quick had been taken into custody in New Roanoke. Alexandra did some quick arithmetic in her head. "This was while he was still in the Wizards' Congress, and around the time he married Ms. King. Maximilian and Julia weren't born yet -"

"Maybe Claudia was visiting her father?" David suggested.

"Maybe she was going to live with him," Anna said.

"Would Ms. King have been cool with that?" David asked.

*Of course she would,* Alexandra thought. Ms. King had all but adopted Alexandra - surely she would have been no less solicitous to her then-husband's eldest daughter. Even if she was a Squib. Ms. King let Myrtle Applegate live on their estate, after all.

"Why did you look all this up?" Alexandra asked finally.

"I found hints about this kind of thing while I was researching my Citizenship Project," David said. "Then when you told us about your mom - I mean, your sister - I just wondered. If you're angry about us getting up in your business, then blame me. I talked Anna into checking into it further."

"Forging my father's seal to send a formal information request was my idea," Anna said. "David didn't make me do anything."

Alexandra shook her head. "I'm not angry. I just wish you would have told me what you were up to all this time."

"We didn't want to put ideas in your head and then find out we were being paranoid," David said.

"We were afraid -" Anna stopped.

"That I'd go off and do something reckless and irresponsible?" Alexandra said.

Their silence was answer enough. Alexandra sighed. "I don't know what to do with this. I still don't know what to say to Claudia. But obviously this is just another thing my father didn't think I needed to know." At least now she knew why her father's animosity for Governor-General Hucksteen was so very, very personal. But why had Hucksteen gone out of his way to have Abraham Thorn's daughter given the Barrenness Curse?

"I'm sorry, Alex," Anna said.

"Don't be." Alexandra stood up and put a hand on Anna's shoulder. "Thank you for finding this out, even if I'm not sure what to do about it. But don't take a risk like that again, Anna. I told your father I'd keep you *out* of trouble. If he's gonna Ava-you-know-what anyone, it will be me."

Anna put a hand on Alexandra's. "I don't think so."

"Next time you want to get up in my business, just tell me about it first," Alexandra said.

David nodded.

"I totally thought you two were becoming a couple," Alexandra said.

Anna jerked her hand away. "Eww."

David's forehead wrinkled. "Eww?"

"Not eww, you," Anna said. "I just mean -"

"You like Dylan better," Alexandra teased.

"Eww!" Anna made a horrible face.

"One other thing," Alexandra said. "David, if you want to learn to duel, we start this week."

"We?" David asked.

"Whoever else I can get to join us."

"Don't look at me," Anna said.

Alexandra patted her shoulder. "I won't let anyone try to duel you."

---

Starting an underground dueling club was a risky undertaking, especially for someone on probation. Most kids who wanted to duel could join the official club with Ms. Shirliffe. Alexandra only knew of one person who was good enough for her to duel and possibly willing. The problem was, she didn't consider him at all trustworthy. Still, she didn't have many options. She went looking for Torvald one sunny winter afternoon.

Since the Winter Ball, Sonja had been attached to Stuart's side whenever they weren't in class. Her friends were tired of hearing about the two of them. Alexandra doubted that Stuart was as lovestruck as Sonja. In fact, at times he seemed embarrassed by the attention Sonja lavished on him. But thanks to Sonja's chatter morning, noon, and night, Alexandra had constant updates of Stuart Cortlandt's whereabouts, and since Stuart and Torvald were best friends, she knew the two of them had plans for an afternoon out-of-doors. It was a non-Dueling Club day, and they had had their first heavy snowfall of the year two days earlier, creating a thick white blanket of snow all around the academy. Most of the sixth graders surged outside as soon as sixth period was over, along with quite a few older students.

Anyone walking across the snow-covered lawns had to be alert for snowballs, snow waves, snow cyclones, or animated snowmen. The few projectiles that came Alexandra's way vanished in a puff of steam when she waved her wand. Usually, the prankster hadn't realized who it was he was levitating snow missiles at, and would turn red and stand paralyzed for a moment, not sure whether to apologize or run. Most chose the latter.

When she'd been a sixth grader herself and her fearsome reputation was just developing, Alexandra had enjoyed spreading terror with a threatening look. She wasn't sure how much she liked it now.

She found Stuart and Torvald with Charlie's help; they were far from the crowd, almost into the woods on the other side of several fields and sheds, so they weren't visible from the academy. Alexandra came around a snowdrift that was unnaturally high for the amount of snow that had fallen that week, and stopped dead in her tracks. She was confronted by a horse-sized beast with a tusked frog's head, a thick scaly body, terrible claws bristling with dark fur, and a spiked tail that belonged on a dinosaur. It grinned fearsomely at her with a lipless mouth big enough to swallow her head. Charlie took off from her shoulder with a screech.

"Scaredy-bird," she said.

Laughter erupted from behind the creature. Torvald stuck his head out from behind its flank. Stuart stood up from where he'd been crouching behind a hillock of snow, with Sonja holding his arm looking abashed.

"How did you know it wasn't real?" Torvald asked.

"First of all, the Hodag isn't real," Alexandra said. "Second, it didn't move. Third, there are no footprints."

"Maybe it can walk across snow without leaving footprints," Torvald said. "That would explain why it's so hard to track."

Alexandra walked in a slow circle around the creature, inspecting it. "Nice job. But you cheated with the skin and the fur - illusions instead of transfiguration?"

"How can you tell that just by looking at it?" Stuart demanded.



Alexandra shrugged. If they didn't know about witch's sight, she wasn't going to tell them. "So what were you going to do, have it charge across the field and make a bunch of sixth graders wet their pants?"

Sonja giggled. Torvald said, "I wish, but do you know how hard animating this much snow would be? We could maybe make it move, but it would end up being a great big snowball before it went a dozen paces."

"We were planning to lure a couple of sixth graders here," Stuart said.

"If I time my Full Body-Bind Curse right, we can make them think the Hodag has paralyzed them," Torvald said. "Then it will open its mouth to 'eat' them." He held his wand up vertically and moved it side to side, and the Hodag's head swiveled on its thick, short neck. Then, to his dismay, the lower half of its jaw fell off and plopped in the snow.

"So immature," Sonja said. Alexandra doubted she'd voiced any opposition to the boys' plan while they were constructing their snow-Hodag.

Alexandra held her hand out, and Charlie landed on it. She set the raven back onto her shoulder.

"Want to help?" Torvald asked. "You're pretty good with Charms."

"I've got more important things to do," Alexandra said. "Can I talk to you?"

Torvald looked at Stuart and Sonja, then back at her. He wagged his eyebrows. "Sure."

Alexandra opened her mouth to say, "Alone," but realized it didn't matter. Torvald would tell Stuart anyway, and she doubted Stuart was able to keep anything from Sonja. "I want to practice dueling."

"Yeah, we miss you at the Dueling Club," Torvald said.

"I'm sure you do. But I want to practice dueling, seriously. I need a partner. Evenings."

Torvald folded his arms. "Really?" A sly grin crossed his face.

"Will you do it or not?"

"You could get in trouble," Stuart said. Alexandra wasn't sure whether he was addressing her or Torvald.

"Only if we get caught," Torvald said.

Sonja asked, "Aren't you on probation, Alexandra?"

"We'll only get caught if someone rats us out."

"Rat," said Charlie.

"One other thing," Alexandra said. "David wants to practice, too."

Torvald's grin slipped. "David? Why doesn't he just join the Dueling Club himself?"

"He wants to keep playing Quidditch. Also, I think he's got kind of a delicate ego. He's sensitive about being beaten in public."

Alexandra wasn't sure why Torvald was suddenly discontented and frowning, but he shrugged. "Fine. Don't expect me to go easy on you, though."

"You guys can come, too," Alexandra said.

Stuart shook his head. "It doesn't sound like a very good idea."

"I'm sure we can find something better to do while Torvald isn't tagging along for once." Sonja's bright-eyed goggling made Alexandra want to gag.

"How about Thursday night?" Torvald asked. For a moment, he and Alexandra were in solidarity, avoiding the spectacle of the two lovebirds making eyes at each other.

"Great. Bring your 'A' game."

"Bring my what?"

"Just bring it." Alexandra waved, and trotted swiftly back across the snow in her magically-transformed boots.

"Bring what?" Torvald called after her, confused.

---

Thursday afternoon, Alexandra received two owls: one from Julia and one from Claudia.

Alexandra had told Julia everything she had learned and everything that had happened over the winter break. Julia was full of concern and sympathy, but she pleaded with Alexandra to be forgiving of Claudia, *"...who may have suffered more than you know. And remember, now she is our sister."*

Alexandra almost crumpled Julia's letter in her fist. *She knew she was our sister all along. She knew she was Maximilian's sister, too.*

Alexandra contemplated Julia's words for a long time. She had written her letter to Julia before Anna and David had told her about the Squib Laws. Julia couldn't possibly know that part of Claudia's story. Did she suspect, knowing about the Squib Laws herself? Or was she just exhibiting her usual kindly nature? Alexandra had not exactly said she hated Claudia and was never going to forgive her, but she had not been in a forgiving mood when she'd written her letter, and perhaps Julia had sensed that. If Julia were there in person, she could probably have softened Alexandra's heart more quickly, but she wasn't.

Alexandra was not, however, quite as unreasonably angry as she had been in December, so she opened Claudia's letter rather than throwing it in a drawer, and thus noticed, just before reading it, that it did not have the usual Muggle postage stamps indicating that it had passed through the U.S. Post Office before being delivered by owl post.

Claudia's letter was brief, but left Alexandra even more confused. Claudia said that Bonnie was still recuperating but had been outside with Brian, and that Brian had asked about Alexandra. Then she wrote:

*"Livia and I are speaking again. It hasn't been easy, and it still isn't, but we missed each other terribly. We have you to thank for our reunion. We'll talk more when you come home over spring break."*

No apology. No asking for forgiveness. And Claudia wrote as if Alexandra's coming home for spring break was a settled matter.

Alexandra slammed the letter into her drawer and went looking for Torvald, in a mood for dueling.

She stalked across the lawn with Charlie on her shoulder. Moonlight reflected off the snow; the moon hovered just over the tops of the trees. She found David out by the snow Hodag where she'd told him to meet her. He was wrapped in his charmed outdoor cloak and assuming exaggerated dueling poses, tossing small fireballs and Stunning Spells into the snow by the edge of the trees. He turned around when Charlie squawked mockingly at him.

"You should wear your old robes for dueling," Alexandra said. "You want holes burned through a good cloak?"

Reluctantly, he shrugged off the cloak, revealing Muggle clothes underneath: a hoodie and jeans. "You aren't actually going to burn holes in my clothes, are you?"

"Didn't you *watch* me dueling?"

David looked worriedly down at his clothes and new boots.

Alexandra sighed. "We'll go easy on you - at first. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah." He at least sounded determined, while he hung his cloak over the tusks of the Hodag snow sculpture. "P.M.E. and weekly Magical Self Defense classes barely teach us anything."

"They teach you enough to defend yourself against magical creatures and Muggles. Not other wizards."

David yelped suddenly and stumbled backward, falling on his rear in the snow as the Hodag's mouth gaped wide and swallowed up his cloak, almost taking his hands with it. A burst of laughter caused anger to creep across his face.

"The Hodag almost got you." Torvald stepped from around the concealing snowbank, chortling.

"Real funny, jerk." David stood up and brushed snow off his pants. He glared at Charlie. "I thought you carry your familiar around 'cause it's supposed to warn you if someone's sneaking up on you?"

"Real funny, jerk," Charlie said.

Torvald twirled his wand. "So, are we going to duel or what?"

Alexandra spent a little time teaching David basics, like not making the wild gestures he'd been imitating and sticking to simple charms until he knew how to parry and deflect. Remembering how much she had hated being made to spend weeks doing basic drills by Ms. Shirtliffe before she'd been allowed to start dueling, she let David go a couple of rounds with her, but she didn't tell him it would be weeks before he'd be good enough to even make her raise her hand to block his spells.

"My turn," Torvald said.

"You duel me," Alexandra said. She didn't trust him to duel David.

Torvald grinned. "Fine with me."

David seemed to have a better idea of how outclassed he was after watching Alexandra and Torvald duel. By the time they were done, the snow was melted all around them, and Alexandra had a few holes burned through her robes and some frizzled hair.

Torvald was Petrified from the waist down, covered with mud, and buried in the side of the snow Hodag. Alexandra uninjured him with a wave of her wand, and the tenth grader stiffly pulled himself free, shaking his head and shoulders to get the snow off. He looked forlornly at the staved-in side of his creation, then reached into it and pulled out David's cloak. He tossed it to the younger boy.

"Not bad for warm-up," he said. "Of course, I'm going to stop going easy on you sooner or later."

"Any time you're ready," Alexandra said.

It was getting dark. David said, "I'm gonna go inside. You coming?" Alexandra wondered if his desire for dueling was quenched.

"Hold on, there, Troublesome," Torvald said. "I demand a rematch."

"We can do this again Saturday if you want," Alexandra said to David.

"Yeah, sure." David waved and headed back across the snow.

Well, Alexandra thought, it wasn't her job to soothe David's ego. She turned to face Torvald and raised her wand. "All right. Stop going easy on me."

He really did try hard to beat her this time. She appreciated the effort; it made the practice worthwhile. But Torvald was not Larry. When she knocked him off his feet for the third time, he wheezed and held up a hand. "Uncle."

She lowered her wand. "That was a good match."

"Are you going to help me up?"

"I didn't hurt you that bad." Suspiciously, she walked over to him and grasped his hand. She pulled him to his feet with a grunt, but was surprised when he didn't let go of her hand.

"So, you and Washington really aren't a couple?" he said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

"Why would anything be wrong with it?" She tried to pull her hand free.

"Well, if you were, I might be worried that he'd hex me if I tried to kiss you."

"What?" Alexandra stopped trying to pull free of his grasp, but with her other hand she slid her grip down her wand. "Are you making fun of me? You should be worried that *I'll* hex you!"

"You threatened to do that at the Winter Ball." Torvald's expression was playful, but there was a seriousness in his tone that made her more nervous than any of his previous attempts to prank, hex, or tease her. "But no one's watching now."

"Jerk," said Charlie from a perch atop the half-melted head of the Hodag.

"Except your raven." Torvald's eyes didn't move from hers. He leaned toward her. "If I kiss you now, will you hex me?"

"I might," she said.

He didn't blink. "I'll take the chance." He kissed her.

Alexandra couldn't say why she kissed him back, but she did. It was a much longer kiss than any she had shared with Payton.

When he finally lifted his face away from hers, he was still holding one of her hands, and she was still holding her wand at the ready in her other hand.

"So, are you going to hex me?" he asked.

"I'm still thinking about it."

He let go of her hand and stepped back. He didn't really seem very worried about being hexed, but there was an anxiousness in his expression. He watched her and waited, keeping his thoughts to himself.

She licked her lips. "Why did you do that?"

"I thought some of your fearsome reputation might rub off on me. Perhaps I'd be able to steal some of your Dark power with a kiss."

She pointed her wand at him, angry now. "Stop mocking me or I will hex you."

His teasing grin faded. "You're the most interesting girl in school."

"What?"

"Would you like to go to the Sweetheart's Dance?"

She kept her wand held before her, only lowering the tip. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." He put his own wand in his pocket, then held his arms out at his sides. "If you're going to hex me, then hex me. Otherwise, how about a 'yes' or a 'no'?"

She lowered her wand. "If this is a set-up, some prank you and Stuart thought up, then I swear, when I do curse you, it won't be a joke."

He took a step toward her, empty hands at his sides. "Is that a yes?" Cautiously, he reached for her hand again and took it. Then he reached for her other hand, the one holding her wand. She let him close his fingers around hers, with her fingers still clenched around

her wand. There was a moment where she thought it must be a prank after all - she had let herself be taken in, and now, just at the moment when she'd fallen for Torvald's little joke, Stuart would jump out from behind the Hodag, maybe with Sonja, and they'd laugh themselves silly at her. Her fingers tightened beneath Torvald's grip.

"Well?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

She let him kiss her again. She kissed him back, and when he let go of her hands, she slid her arms around his neck, still holding her wand. They kissed until she started to shiver, and Charlie said, "Alexandra."

"This is why you agreed to meet me for dueling?" she asked, her voice quieter, puffing mist in the gathering gloom of the evening.

He shrugged. "I do like dueling, and you are pretty good."

"I'm really good. I'm better than you."

Torvald smiled. "Okay, Troublesome. You're the most awesome, unbeatable witch ever. The entire school trembles before your might. Someday you'll be scarier than Dean Grimm and your father put together." Alexandra let go of him, and more seriously, he said, "I'll keep practicing with you. I mean, not tonight, but if you want to."

"Okay." She stood there a moment, and couldn't think of what else she wanted to say. Her thoughts were still catching up to her. She gestured, and Charlie flew to her shoulder.

"How do you get a raven to do that?" Torvald asked.

"Do what? Sit on my shoulder?"

"Wicked clever," Charlie said.

Torvald walked alongside her as they headed back to the school. "So can I tell people you're my girlfriend? To see if any of that scary reputation rubs off on me?"

"Knock it off. I'm no one's girlfriend." She wasn't sure if he was serious, nor could she tell if he was disappointed. "Let's just say I've



decided not to hex you, for now. If tomorrow the whole school is talking about how you kissed me -"

"No." Torvald held out a hand, startling her. In a voice like someone on the verge of swooning, he said, "No more threats. I can only take so much romance in one night." He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss it. Alexandra blushed; the lit rear entrances of the academy were just before them, and other students occasionally came outside even in the early evening. No one else was visible at the moment. Only an owl flapped overhead. Torvald let go of her hand, pressed his hand to his heart in the same theatrical manner of a lover overcome by emotion on a stage, and then hurried away, giving her a wave as he disappeared inside.

"Big fat jerk," Charlie said.

"Yeah." Alexandra looked at her hand, and dropped it to her side. "You'd better keep your mouth shut, Charlie."

Charlie made a sound like a snicker.

---

Alexandra put off mentioning her date to the Sweetheart's Dance with Anna. *Maybe I can find a date for her to the dance, too*, she thought, though she had no idea who Anna might want to go with.

To her great relief, no one was talking about her and Torvald the next day and there were no sudden hushes as she entered the cafeteria. Torvald sat with Stuart, and as usual Sonja was sitting as close to Stuart as she could while Dean Beville and Mrs. Verde monitored the breakfast crowd. Then Torvald grinned at Alexandra. The worst part about it was that it was not his usual teasing I'm-up-to-something grin. It was a silly, bashful grin that she thought was embarrassing and naked in its obviousness, and she couldn't help feeling warmth rising up her neck. But no one else seemed to notice, except Sonja, who beamed at her so brightly that Alexandra thought the other girl would surely start yelling across the cafeteria any moment.

She was startled, relieved, and unaccountably flustered when Constance and Forbearance sat down across the table from her and Anna. It was the first time they'd joined her outside of class since the Winter Ball. She stammered a greeting, a little too loudly, then

wondered why they and Anna were staring at her as she caught the glass of orange juice she'd almost knocked over.

"Are you in the gales, Alexandra?" Constance asked.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean - I don't know what that means. But I'm fine."

"Alright." Constance didn't seem convinced, but she went on. "We'uns need to convene again 'fore your birthday."

"All your stars an' charts changes afterwards," Forbearance said. "We can redraw everythin', but the Grannies helped us with the proper times an' words on assumption that you hain't seen fifteen."

Alexandra sipped from her orange juice. "You really think you can get the Stars Above to answer this time?"

"I reckon we might could get their attention. If'n they'll answer, no one 'neath the sky can predict. But the Grannies say if -" Forbearance bit her lip.

"Let's just bide a bit," Constance said.

"Bide for what?" Alexandra wondered what the twins were keeping to themselves.

"Will you humor us, Alexandra?" Forbearance asked.

"Sure." Alexandra exchanged looks with Anna, then asked, "Do we need everyone we had before - David and Innocence and Sonja, too?"

"Innocence knows, an' I talked to David," Constance said.

"I hain't caught Sonja alone yet, bein' as she's always claspin' Stuart Cortlandt nowadays." Forbearance pursed her lips. "But I passed her a note in Astrology."

"Passing notes in class?" Alexandra grinned. "You'd better not let Innocence know I've been such a bad influence on you."

Just then Sonja passed by, in the company of Stuart and Torvald. "Oh, Alexandra, we need to talk soon," she said in a loud whisper

that was bursting with the promise of gossip she could barely keep to herself.

"Oh, Alexandra, we need to talk soon," Torvald repeated, pitching his voice high. Sonja giggled and slapped his arm, provoking a scolding from Mrs. Verde, while Alexandra hastily gulped down the rest of her orange juice.

---

Alexandra and Anna sat together in the library that night. The books Alexandra had piled around her had little to do with her classwork. There were grimoires of Memory and Fertility Charms, textbooks on Artificing, Advanced Transfigurations, and Permanence Potions, and a volume of Alchemical Bindings.

"This is the problem with magic," she said to Anna. "You can't cure things just by inventing a new spell. Everything is related! Just to create a Pensieve, you have to know Artificing, a whole bunch of advanced Potions, Memory and Scrying Charms, two or three branches of Alchemy, how to Enchant water and minerals... never mind if you want to do something new. And restoring memories? That's Memory Charms, Legilimency, Healing, Potions, and maybe even temporal magic. I could spend all year and maybe I'd be able to create a stupid *dumb* spell or something. I could learn a hundred spells someone else has already invented in that time."

Anna folded her hands on the table. "A hundred? Really?"

Alexandra leaned back in her chair. "My father's done things I haven't even read about. Even if he is smarter than me, he still went to school and had a life. I don't see how he was better than Merlin at age fifteen."

"He probably wasn't," Anna said. "But he probably figured out before you did that magic is hard."

Alexandra gave her friend a narrow look. Anna's deadpan comments had replaced the scoldings she used to offer with such frequency.

"Fertility Charms?" Someone giggled. Alexandra leaned forward and pushed away the book detailing conception and contraception magic

- a book she'd been surprised to find so easily available in the library, considering all the other magic that was restricted.

Sonja sat down in the chair next to Alexandra, her eyes wide with interest and a certain amount of admiration. "You know those charms take a lot of finesse, right? I mean, unless you're a Healer -"

"I'm not planning on casting any Fertility Charms," Alexandra said, keeping her voice low.

"You should have stayed in Mrs. Verde's class."

"Why?"

"Silly - what do you think Herbology and Astrology is for? A witch never gets pregnant unless she wants to."

Alexandra's mouth dropped open. Anna's did too.

"So," Sonja said, in a more serious tone, "you and Torvald -"

"No!" Alexandra said, in such a loud voice that students at other tables looked at her and several "Ssh!"s came in their direction.

Anna closed her mouth and her eyebrows went up. "You and Torvald?"

"No," Alexandra said, more quietly. "Not even."

"I didn't mean -" Sonja gestured at the book Alexandra had pushed aside. Then she smiled slyly. "Though you sure got touchy fast."

*I'm going to kill you,* Alexandra thought, but the thought stayed in her head and Sonja kept smiling.

"But you are dating," Sonja said.

"Not... exactly."

"Not exactly?" Anna said.

"He asked me out last night. I kind of said yes. But I don't know if that means we're dating."

Anna's expression was blank.

"I was going to tell you," Alexandra said. "In fact I was going to tell you before Gossip Girl here started running her mouth."

Sonja sat back, and Alexandra realized that her words had stung the other girl. "I haven't gossiped to anyone about you," Sonja said. "I *assumed* Anna already knew."

Alexandra frowned, glancing again at Anna, who just shrugged.

"I guess if you think I'm such a gossip then you won't want me helping anymore," Sonja said.

"Helping with what?" Alexandra asked.

Sonja made an exasperated sound. "Forbearance told me we're redrawing your charts according to some Ozarker lore so we can prepare another ritual."

"Yeah, she told me that, too." Alexandra gritted her teeth. "Okay, I'm sorry, Sonja. I just..."

"Oh, fie." Sonja waved a hand. "You're so secretive. I suppose you didn't want anyone to know about you and Torvald." She winked. "I must admit, when I was thinking of who to fix you up with, Torvald wasn't exactly at the top of my list. I suppose he's nice enough, but he's so obnoxious, and immature, and always getting himself and Stuart in trouble for hexing. Also, well, his face is rather unfortunate..."

"He's also back there in the stacks," Anna said.

Sonja's eyes widened. Alexandra turned her head. Torvald was standing far down the aisle, deeply engaged in a book he had opened, and then as if only just noticing the girls, he looked up and waved.

Alexandra rubbed her forehead, then brushed her hair out of her eyes.

"I think he wants to talk to you," Anna said.

"Well, then he should come over and talk to me."

Anna's expression was wry amusement. Sonja, relieved that Torvald hadn't overheard her, grinned.

Anna gathered her books and scrolls. "I've finished my homework."

"I'll walk back to DDKT with you," Sonja said.

"I'll come with you," Alexandra said.

"Don't you have homework to do first?" Anna said.

"I can do it in our room."

"Are you afraid maybe there's a boy who really does want to court you?" Sonja asked.

Alexandra frowned. "I'm not -"

Anna stood up. "You can go to the Sweetheart's Dance with him, but neither of you try fix me up with a date, okay?"

"Well, you certainly can't stay in your room while we go," Sonja said.

Alexandra sat at the table as Anna walked away with Sonja, still protesting to little avail. After the other two were gone, Alexandra stood and stalked down the aisle between the shelves and directly up to Torvald, who was still leaning against a row of books with an old red volume propped open in his hand.

"What's up, Troublesome?" he said.

"Stop calling me that." She looked at the book he was holding. *The Third Century Anatolian-Hellenic Centaur Wars*. "Interesting reading?"

"Oh, yes." He glanced down at the pages. "Anatolia is... an interesting place."

"What about Anatolian Centaurs?"

"Centaurs?" He looked again. "Oh, right. Centaurs - they're really interesting too. Did you know no centaur has ever set foot in the New World?"

"Really?"

"That's what I've heard." Torvald closed the book and put it back on the shelf. "So what was the big meeting about?"

"Apparently, how everyone knows we're dating now."

"We're dating now?"

"I don't know, are we?" Alexandra's flippant question was belied by her accelerating heartbeat.

Torvald didn't give a flippant answer, and when he ran his tongue over suddenly-dry lips, she realized he was also nervous. She was glad that at least he was being an idiot, too. So she didn't resist at all when he took hold of her and kissed her.

It was several moments, almost the length of time she could hold her breath, before she mumbled, with her lips still pressed against his, "We're in the library."

"What do you think all the older kids do back here?" Torvald asked. "You really think everyone is busy studying?"

"Actually, yes." But Alexandra didn't feel like explaining to Torvald that Bran and Poe had told her how they discouraged young lovers from necking in the stacks. She kissed him this time, turning away from the shelf so that she wasn't pressed against the books (a large volume about manticores had been sticking her in the back) and hoped the library elves wouldn't catch them. That would be very embarrassing.

## **A Girl Named Troublesome**

Though Alexandra had been planning to meet Torvald the following evening - and maybe even to practice dueling with him some more - Forbearance slipped her a note asking her to come to the Pritchards' room instead.

Alexandra intended to sound cool when she caught Torvald in the hallway and told him, but she ended up sounding apologetic, which just added to the pile of embarrassing, awkward feelings she was experiencing.

She and Anna went to see Constance and Forbearance after dinner. Alexandra and Anna had rarely entered the twins' room, though Alexandra wasn't sure why; certainly the Ozarkers had never made their friends feel unwelcome.

Constance and Forbearance had the same lamps as everyone else in their room, but the light had a different, sunny quality when Alexandra and Anna stepped inside, almost as if it were still daytime. Alexandra realized with something more than her normal sight that there was a charm on the walls and ceiling. It was a subtle bit of Glamour. She wondered which of the twins had cast it.

Alexandra's side of her room was always a bit messy, and she did little to personalize it, while Anna was neat and orderly but decorated her half of the room with photographs of her parents and Chinese scrolls and wall hangings. By contrast, the Pritchards' shared room was immaculately clean, with beds made, desks clear, and windows spotless. The few ornaments were plain baskets and ribbons and some animated wooden animals on Forbearance's side of the windowsill. Even the large owl cage in which their barn owls sat when not in the aviary was spotlessly clean. They had put up a pegged wooden rack by the door, from which hung an assortment of bonnets in different colors. Alexandra thought the Charmbridge elves probably despaired of ever having anything to do in the twins' room.

The Pritchards were bonnetless now. Rarely in four years had Alexandra seen their heads uncovered. After letting Alexandra and Anna in, Constance sat down and resumed running a brush through her hair, which was longer than it appeared when wrapped tightly beneath her bonnet. Forbearance's hair was still tied up, with a few



curls escaping to hover around her face as she faced Alexandra with an anxious expression.

"What's up?" Alexandra asked.

"We'uns is afraid we might not've told you the unskint truth," Forbearance said.

Alexandra exchanged a look with Anna at this confession. Anna was similarly nonplussed.

Constance stopped brushing her hair. "Forbearance don't mean to say we'uns lied to you, Alex. We wasn't sure ourselves 'til now."

"Okay," Alexandra said, "why don't you tell me what you're talking about?"

Forbearance took a breath. "You recall we'uns told you after we hied home an' covened with the Grannies that it might could be you have an Ozarker Name?"

Alexandra nodded. "Yes. I still don't see how that works. But if you believe it, I'll take your word for it."

"Hain't a matter of what we'uns believe," Constance said.

"We'uns told you that there needs be a girl named Troublesome betimes," Forbearance said.

"Right," Alexandra said, "though I can understand why no one would name their daughter that since she vexes and woes and is nothing but trouble."

"We'uns is s'pposed to call 'pon the Parliament of Stars by your true an' proper Name," Forbearance said.

"Troublesome." Alexandra made an effort not to roll her eyes. "So your Grannies say."

"So the Grannies *intend*," Forbearance said quietly.

Constance sniffed. "We'uns have unraveled every word and gimmick in the work the Grannies taught us, an'..." She swallowed. "We'uns think the Grannies mean us to *Name* you."

"I'm confused," Alexandra said.

"Some people is Named," Forbearance said, "an' some is *Named*."

Alexandra waited a moment, then said, "That doesn't really help."

Forbearance wrung her hands. "Accordin' to lore, some folks has a Name no one gave 'em but the Stars Above. They was just born with it, no matter what their parents named 'em."

"But with the right work," Constance said, "you can *give* someone a Name."

Alexandra frowned. "So all this stuff about how my signs and stars and stuff say I'm Troublesome... that's all just superstit- sorry, lore, but the Grannies actually want to make it come true? They want you to Name me Troublesome?"

"We reckon," Forbearance said. Her eyes were downcast.

"Will the new ritual actually summon the Parliament of Stars?"

"Might could, if you is Named Troublesome," Forbearance said. "But if you is Named Troublesome, Alex..."

"I know - I'm dangerous, doleful calamity."

"I think you should take this more seriously," Anna said.

"I think you oughter know how Troublesome's entire story goes," Constance said.

Alexandra grinned. "I read a few of them. They actually have a couple of books of Ozarker legends in the library. My favorite is when Troublesome smart-mouths one of the Dreadly Powers, so he punishes her by giving her his job."

"Dreadly Powers?" Anna asked.

"In one version it was Death," Alexandra said. "But there was another version where it's Mischief."

"It was Mischief in the tales our Ma told us," Constance murmured.

"Hain't many Ozarker legends that talk about Death," Forbearance said.

"Then there are the more depressing ones," Alexandra went on, "like where Troublesome plays a riddle game with a naiad. A boat full of people escapes while she's distracting it, but then they all drown anyway because she messed with a naiad in the first place. Or Troublesome turns a bunch of Muggles into dwarves, creating some kind of ugly hill clan that's been the enemy of Ozarkers ever since. Or Troublesome creates a plague of clockwork bugs that carry off all the food in the hollers just before winter. But she saves everyone from starvation by going to the Indian Territories and bringing back some corn maidens. Troublesome goes to a dance she wasn't invited to and shows her ankles, which causes all kinds of trouble even though everyone makes a point of saying how unpretty she is. And so on. Then there's all the Troublesome and Responsible stories, which according to the warlock who cataloged them, are later additions, from after your ancestors took the Road West."

Constance was still now. Forbearance had stopped wringing her hands. Both of them stared at Alexandra in amazement.

Alexandra sat on the chair she'd been offered, arms clasping one knee, and smiled at them. "See, I do my homework, too. So are all those stories true?"

Forbearance shrugged. "We'uns reckon there's a grain o' truth to 'em."

"There is dwarves in the hills who's meaner'n goblins an' twice as ugly," Constance said.

"And sometimes you can still dig up clockwork bugs all over the Five Hollers."

"We'uns reckon someone did some of those things."

"Not the same girl."

"But a girl named Troublesome," Alexandra said. "Do any Ozarkers actually name their daughters 'Troublesome'?"

"Once did," Constance said. "Things've changed, now no one'd dare. Most folks say it's like wishin' for wickedness."

Alexandra thought a moment. "So I get to be the girl no Ozarker wants to be, and they can say they've got their Troublesome. Do you think the Grannies mean me harm?"

Constance and Forbearance exchanged looks.

"The ritual won't harm you none," Forbearance said. "We'uns is certain 'o that."

"The Grannies wouldn't do that," Constance said firmly.

Anna was less sanguine. "But they didn't tell you exactly what the ritual would really do."

"They'uns must've knowed we'd reason it," Constance said.

"A lot of what they'uns teach us is to inkle things on our own," Forbearance said. "It hain't like lessons here at Charmbridge. We'uns is given tools an' it's for us to figger how to use 'em. We're to use our witches'..." Her voice trailed off.

"Witches' sight? I think I know what you mean." Alexandra thought of her father's frustrating 'lessons.' "So being Named Troublesome won't hurt me. Heck, everyone calls me that already. Even my boy-um, everyone."

"But, Alexandra, Troublesome's story hain't just in them books you read," Forbearance said.

"I thought you trust the Grannies," Alexandra said.

"Oh, Alexandra, we do!" Forbearance's eyes brimmed with tears. "But they'uns is wise an' crafty an'..."

"They'uns is Ozarkers," Constance said, "an' you hain't."

"You just said the ritual won't hurt me," Alexandra said.

"Not directly," Forbearance said. "But if you is Named Troublesome..."

"What, will I be cursed with a fate worse than dying in seven years?"

Everyone flinched. No one answered.

"Whatever." Alexandra was losing patience. "I'm not named Troublesome, and no ritual can turn me into a fairy tale character. You don't really expect me to back out now, do you? Thanks for the concern, but it's a little late. So I'm supposed to fill some role for the Grannies? Maybe they have a plan of their own, or they just want me to satisfy some superstition. Well, if you trust the Grannies, then I trust you." She grabbed Forbearance's hands. "I know you'd never do anything that will hurt me. The worst that will happen is we learn nothing. No offense, but I'm not really convinced by all this stuff about Ozarker rhymes and Naming magic and Troublesome. All I care about is whether I can actually get some answers from the Stars Above. So let's do the ritual."

Forbearance and Constance didn't look at her, but they nodded.

"So, are you going to the Sweetheart's Dance with Benjamin and Mordecai?" Alexandra asked.

The twins' uneasiness became a different sort of discomfort.

"The Sweetheart's Dance hain't a proper ball," Constance said.

"Connie don't want to go to no koosy dance without no romancin'," Forbearance said.

"If you're *bespoken*, they should try to romance you a little," Alexandra said.

Anna stared at her, as if she couldn't figure out what Alexandra was up to.

Constance put her chin in her hands. "It'd be nice if'n they'd try to be just a bit romantic."

"Innocence is probably going to take William again," Alexandra said.

"You mean William's goin' to ask Innocence," Constance said.

"Yeah, right." Alexandra turned to Anna.

Anna held up her hands. "Oh no. I told you, I don't need a date and I'm not going."

"Come on. If everyone else goes -"

"If everyone else jumped off the Invisible Bridge I wouldn't follow you."

"Sure you would." Alexandra grinned at her.

Forbearance cleared her throat. "An' who's escortin' you to the dance, Alexandra?"

Alexandra hesitated before she answered. "Torvald Krogstad."

Constance perked up. "So it's true he's settin' up to you?"

"He's what?"

"You'uns 're courtin'!" Forbearance said.

"I wouldn't exactly call it courting."

"I wouldn't either," Anna muttered.

"Look, we're just... dating," Alexandra said. "Neither of us is thinking about marriage."

Constance leaned forward, eyes wide. Forbearance was just as eager. "Tell us more about the... datin'."

---

Alexandra could not explain even to herself what she saw in Torvald. He was not handsome. Payton had been better-looking. David was better-looking. There were actually few boys in school who weren't better-looking than Torvald, with his plain Old Colonial clothes, self-inflicted haircuts, and an acne-scarred face made worse by experimenting with Transfigurations and curses.

Maybe it was that goofy grin of his, she thought. And she was becoming rather fond of the kissing. She knew that Torvald wanted to do more than kiss, and at first she had firmly pushed him away, but she was beginning to think that she was doing that because she was 'supposed' to and not because she wanted to. The voices of Claudia and Archie nagged at her in her mind, full of advice and lectures that she didn't want.

Anna alternated between feigning disinterest and disgust and wanting to hear all the details. They lay awake late at night as Alexandra tried to sort out her feelings.

"Just don't get in trouble," Anna said, after an evening spent recounting how she and Torvald had climbed up to a room adjacent to the aviary. Torvald had shown off a few invisible jinxes which he'd used to terrorize two sophomores, raining the spells down on the couple who were walking around out on the lawn. Then they had spent the next ten minutes making out, until they heard someone else coming up the stairs.

"They were just minor jinxes," Alexandra said. She'd told Torvald to knock it off, but not until after she had seen enough to imitate them.

"That's not what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think, Alex?"

"We haven't gone *that* far."

"Are you going to?"

Alexandra wasn't shocked at the question, but she sensed that Anna was disturbed by her delay in responding. "I haven't really thought about it," she lied. ""But maybe you should come to the Sweetheart's Dance, to keep an eye on us. You never know what sort of trouble we might get into if we sneak off afterward..."

"Good night," Anna said, turning over and putting a pillow over her head.

Alexandra continued to meet Torvald after school for dueling. She was glad for the practice, though she was afraid that their sessions were improving his skills more than they were improving hers. David continued to come when he didn't have Quidditch practice. Sonja, after initially expressing disinterest, began to show up when Stuart was busy.

David was not an adept pupil. Alexandra spent all of one afternoon trying to teach him tactics. It was cold and cloudy and they were

near the woods, not far from where Stuart and Torvald's snow Hodag was still a mushy, half-melted lump of snow.

"Look," Alexandra said, "you don't face off against someone and think 'I'm going to use a Stunner' or 'I'm going to melt her fingers' - Stunning Charms only work if she can't cast a Blocking Jinx, and going for the fingers only works if you can get the fingers right where she holds the wand *while* she's casting the jinx -"

"How the heck can you see which fingers someone is using? By the time you notice that, they've already hexed you!" David said.

"Don't you dare melt my fingers!" Sonja said.

Charlie cawed a warning, and all of them relaxed into stances not suggestive of dueling. Torvald walked over to Alexandra and slid an arm around her shoulders. She allowed it, but felt very self-conscious.

William and Innocence came over the little hill the group was using for cover. William wore a fluffy red robe over his coat and thick pants and lace-up boots. Innocence was wearing her bonnet for once, and a wool cloak over a long dress.

"Don't kill me," William said. "She made me come."

"We're practicing Charms and Transfigurations for our midterms," Sonja said. David nodded.

"We're making out," Torvald said. Alexandra jabbed him with an elbow.

Innocence ignored everyone but Alexandra. "I done told you, Alex, don't tell me no lies. You can tell me to broom an' I will, but don't treat me like a li'l child."

"I didn't lie to you," Alexandra said. "William, how did you know we were out here?"

The seventh grader ran a hand through his untidy blond hair. "Well, Innocence and I were talking, and I knew you'd probably do something because Ms. Shirtliffe won't let you participate in the Dueling Club..."

"Never mind. You can't join us."



"Why not?" Innocence folded her arms to match Alexandra's stance. "'Cause we'uns is too young? As if you wasn't out here learnin' duelin' when you was a seventh grader."

"Were you?" Torvald asked.

"My brother was teaching me." Alexandra's tone made Torvald and Innocence fall silent. "Innocence, your sisters would kill me."

"My sisters allows Benjamin an' Mordecai Rash to tell 'em what to do. I don't mean to be reg'lated so. If'n you send me away, say it's 'cause you esteem I'm too silly an' foolish, but don't say it's on account o' my sisters."

Innocence knew just what buttons to push. Alexandra looked at Torvald. He was no help.

"I don't think you're too silly and foolish," Alexandra said. "But think about the position you're putting me in. Constance and Forbearance are my friends."

Innocence stuck her lip out, but she did seem to be thinking about it. "If'n I promise to make Connie an' Forbearance easy, will you let us practice with y'all?"

"What do you mean make them easy?"

Innocence drew the toe of her shoe in a slow circle on the ground. "I'll tell 'em what I'm about."

Alexandra eyed her skeptically. "And you think they'll let you?"

"I'll make 'em easy. They won't be vexed with you none, Alex, I promise."

"Witch's honor?"

Innocence held out her wand. "Witch's honor."

Alexandra sighed and tapped her wand. "Fine. David, pair off against William. Sonja, you versus Innocence. Don't look at me like that."

"We're not going to make out tonight, are we?" Torvald whispered in her ear

"If you can beat me once, I'll break curfew tonight."

He almost did. She was tempted to let him win a round, but she didn't.

---

Alexandra's time was filled with classwork and studying. She and her friends hardly ever played games in the rec room anymore. She was with Anna in the library when she wasn't doing JROC drills in the afternoon or dueling in the evening. She began looking forward to the moments she spent with Torvald as much because it was a break from studying as because she enjoyed being with him.

A blizzard swept across Central Territory in early February; after a month of bitter cold without much snow, Charmbridge Academy's grounds were buried beneath several feet. With students outside playing in the snow and constructing the sort of elaborate sculptures only magic could create, Alexandra's unauthorized dueling club had to venture further from the school to be safely out of sight. They met at the edge of the treeline, and decided to duel in the woods. Alexandra forbade anyone to leave the group's sight.

"What if I have to take a piss?" Torvald asked.

"Hold it until we go back inside," Alexandra said.

"She's just jealous that girls can't go in the woods," Torvald said to David.

"Says who?" Alexandra glared at him. "Don't goof off. I mean it."

Torvald whistled and held up his hands. "Yes, ma'am."

"No one wanders off, and if anyone is acting funny, say something."

Sonja and Innocence both nodded seriously.

Alexandra directed tree branches, pine needles, and snow balls at Torvald. He was becoming better at deflecting her spells, but she had learned all of his techniques, and the style that served him well in games of hexem did him no good against a serious opponent. She let him help William with his hexes after releasing him from the snowy fist she'd animated to grab him. She paired David with Sonja, which was entertaining since both of them were too flustered to do

more than toss weak Stunners, Stinging Jinxes, and Disarming Spells at one another.

Sonja's hair was damp and no longer glowing after David flipped her on her head into a snowbank. She said she wanted to rest, so David practiced with Innocence. Alexandra wasn't sure if he looked so uneasy because he didn't like dueling a younger girl, or because he was afraid she'd win.

"He must really like you," Sonja said, "considering how badly you treat him." She was watching Torvald flick his wand to demonstrate to William how to cast a shower of tiny fireballs.

Startled, Alexandra said indignantly, "I don't treat him badly."

"How many shirts has he had to replace after dueling you? And you must have added about a dozen scars to his face."

"I have not scarred his face. We're dueling. We're not supposed to go easy on each other."

"Most boys prefer girls who aren't so rough. I'm just saying."

"I think he likes me the way I am."

Sonja raised an eyebrow.

Alexandra lowered her voice, while keeping an eye on the other kids. "So, have you actually tested your witch's knowledge with Stuart?"

Sonja blinked, and then, realizing what Alexandra was referring to, became much more serious. "Not yet. He's actually a little... reluctant. Those Old Colonials are very conservative, you know." Sonja's eyes were alive with curiosity. "And you?"

Alexandra kept her voice cool. "No."

They turned their attention back to the others. Innocence was pelting David with hexes. He was reluctant to counter-attack but was showing improvement in his ability to cast Blocking Jinxes. William had dropped his wand and was dancing around holding singed fingers while Torvald laughed.

"Can I trust you?" Alexandra asked.

Sonja turned to Alexandra, surprised. "Of course."

"If you tell anyone -"

Sonja put her hands on her hips. "I haven't said anything about that *other* project."

"This isn't about that." Alexandra licked her lips. "It's about what you said before... witch's knowledge."

Sonja said nothing, just widened her eyes a little. Alexandra said, "So, I've read *Astrology for Witches* and *Traditional Herbology*, but I'm not sure..."

A smile crept across Sonja's face. "Stars Above, you really are thinking about it, aren't you?"

Studying the toes of her boots, Alexandra nodded.

Sonja made a small squealing noise. "Oh, wait until Janet and Lydia and Carol hear about this!" All the blood rushed from Alexandra's face, and Sonja laughed. "I'm kidding! I won't even tell Stuart."

"You'd better not!"

"Big fat jerk!" Charlie said. The raven was watching the proceedings from a tree branch high overhead.

"Who, me or Stuart?" Sonja asked the bird.

"Well, well, well," said a voice Alexandra knew too well. It came from the trees, and she drew her wand and pointed it while everyone else was just starting to turn in that direction. David paused at the wrong moment and was hit in the face by a fat bubble from Innocence's wand that splattered him with pink goo.

Larry came sauntering through the trees with his black owl on his shoulder. The owl ignored the squawking raven, and fixed its eyes balefully on Alexandra. Behind Larry came Wade and Ethan.

"Unauthorized dueling," Larry said, halting at the edge of the little dip in the snowy ground where Alexandra and her group had gathered. "Do you underclassmen know how much trouble you could get in for that?"

"Only if we're caught," Alexandra said. Larry gave her an insolent stare, and seemed to take no notice of the wand she was pointing at him. "If you rat on us, I'll confess - to *all* of my unauthorized dueling activities."

"Rat!" said Charlie.

Larry regarded her a moment. "I believe you would, Troublesome." He took a few steps further into the open area between the trees, and shrugged his cloak away from his shoulders in a smooth movement that exposed his right arm and dislodged his owl from his shoulder. Alexandra envied the finesse of it - it was almost as if he'd been practicing. "Come on, then. Let's do it."

Alexandra frowned. "Do what?"

"Come on, Larry, don't be a blaggard," Torvald said.

"Come on, Larry," Larry mimicked in a high-pitched voice. He drew his wand, very quickly, and flicked a curse in Torvald's direction without looking at him. Torvald fell to the ground with his legs locked together.

"You want to duel me?" Alexandra said.

"No, I want to duel the little girl in the bonnet."

"My name's Innocence," Innocence said angrily.

"Okay." Alexandra advanced slowly into the clearing. "Keep your owl away from my raven." The owl was now sitting high in a tree, overlooking the scene.

"Corwin won't go anywhere."

William and David dragged Torvald out of the way, while Innocence nervously stood next to Sonja. Opposite them stood Wade and Ethan, belligerent but silent.

"Any stakes?" Alexandra asked. She and Larry were now circling one another slowly. "Wagers? I'm sure you have something to prove, sneaking up on us out here."

"What do I have to prove? That you're a dangerous, reckless little brat who thinks rules don't apply to you? That I'm better than you?"

Everyone already knows that. I just want the pleasure of beating you again. Since you went and got yourself kicked out of the Dueling Club, Friday afternoons haven't been nearly as much fun."

"Nice to know you miss me," Alexandra said, and when he opened his mouth to retort, she said, "*Caedarus!*"

The green sphere flew directly at his face. He was so shocked that it almost hit him, but he dispelled the green ball by thrusting his wand directly into it. Alexandra had allowed herself to stop and watch the effect of her spell rather than follow it up with another one.

Larry sneered. "A copycat, that's all you are, aping your betters. *This* is how it's done - *Caedarus!*"

His green ball of energy was much larger and faster. Alexandra tried to deflect it, realizing from watching Larry that the sphere could be dispelled with a touch. But it required a very precise touch, and she only weakened it before being knocked halfway into the trees.

*Trying to learn countering techniques on the fly is stupid*, she thought, spitting blood. The impact had cut her lips and undoubtedly left a bruise across her back. *Max would have told me that.*

"She's hurt! Duel's over," Torvald said.

"Not until she yields or she's unconscious," Larry said, stalking toward her. "You know the rules, Krogstad."

"Back off, Torvald." Alexandra rose shakily to her feet. She was afraid Torvald might intervene, which was strictly against dueling etiquette and would be horribly embarrassing to her. *Do all boys think once you kiss them it's their job to protect you?*

Larry threw Black Coils at her, which was a nasty, barely-legal hex. Alexandra used a reversal spell that didn't often work, but was fantastic when it did. She got lucky. The dark coils twisted and writhed in the air and almost settled around Larry before he dispelled them, and Alexandra yanked his feet out from under him and dragged him ten feet across the snow, cloak dragging behind him, before he countered that spell and cast a Shield Charm so he could stand up.

They had both moved further into the woods, with all the spectators following at a wary distance.

Behind Larry, Alexandra saw something moving between the trees. It was small and fast, and she almost thought she'd imagined it as it rushed from the shadow of a tree to a dark, icy hollow beneath a fallen log surrounded by bare bushes. Charlie cawed and Corwin hooted. Alexandra couldn't tell whether they were warning their master and mistress, cheering them on, or antagonizing one another.

What had she seen? Just a small animal - but in that fleeting glimpse she had retained the impression of a peculiar kind of movement, a spidery scuttle on stick-like legs -

Flames burst against her shoulder. Her cloak and jacket ignited. She screamed and extinguished the flames. Larry was so surprised that he didn't finish her off while he had the chance. Alexandra put her hand to her shoulder, which was already beginning to hurt. She knew the pain would increase rapidly. A flame jet was only a distraction - a seventh grader could blow it away. It was only dangerous if you were stupid enough to let it burn you.

Larry stood in front of the log with the dark, concave shadow beneath it.

"Stop," Alexandra said. "I yield."

Larry was as astonished as everyone else. He lowered his wand, contempt turning to disappointment. "What happened to you, Quick? You've gotten soft."

"Move," Alexandra said. She walked passed him and tried to shove him aside as Torvald and the others came running toward her. Larry barely moved, but he didn't push back, just stared at her. "Stay back!" she shouted at her friends. Her wand was shaking, and not just because her shoulder was beginning to throb.

"What's your problem?" Larry demanded. He waved a hand at Wade and Ethan, who were also approaching.

"Shut up." Alexandra threw a fireball at the log, followed by three more, blasting and melting the snow all around it and causing the brown branches sticking out of the snow to smolder. The log lay there on frozen ground that was now steaming, with a space

beneath it just large enough for a small child to hide. There was nothing there.

While she kept her eyes fixed on the log, she searched all around with her witch-senses. She could feel something - magic that was familiar to her now. They were standing at the edge of the magical wards around Charmbridge Academy, the wards that Ms. Grimm said kept Dark creatures and unauthorized visitors away.

It was almost silent. Charlie and Corwin had both stopped making noise, and the only sound was the crunching of boots in the snow as the other kids approached. That and the wind through the trees, which carried other noises: distant sounds, dripping, things falling in the forest, and - she could have imagined it, or it could have been a memory rather than an actual sound. Something *skittering*...

"You've actually cracked," Larry said. "All that pretending to be Dark and deranged has affected you for real."

She turned away from the woods, and the wards. Torvald ignored her warning and ran up to her. "Alexandra, what's wrong?"

"We're at the edge of the magical protections around Charmbridge," Alexandra said. "We should go inside now." She winced as she realized that her shoulder was truly beginning to hurt. If you *let* flames touch you, witches' flesh burned like anyone else's, and Larry's flame jet had been hot enough to burn her badly.

David said, "You could have killed her, you mother-"

Ethan said, "Watch your mouth, M-"

"You call me a Mudblood, I won't duel you, I'll freakin' -"

Simultaneously, Larry said, "Ethan, shut up," and Alexandra said, "David, shut up." David might have become angry, except at that moment Alexandra stumbled and Torvald had to catch her.

"Merlin, Larry, you really did hurt her," Torvald said, seeing her skin through the charred hole in her jacket, and putting a hand to her swollen mouth.



"Basic spell defense. Only an idiot would just stand there in front of a flame jet!" Larry was becoming defensive. "If she wasn't paying attention, it's not my fault!"

"I'll carry you," Torvald said.

"I don't need to be carried," Alexandra said. She was feeling a little faint. She held onto his arm. "I just might need... a little help."

They all walked back to the academy. Charlie sat on her unburned shoulder, then hopped onto Torvald's as Alexandra winced. Sonja berated Larry while David muttered ominously about siccing Malcolm on Larry's owl. There wasn't much conversation, and Alexandra was using all her willpower not to shout at them.

In the infirmary, they had to wait for a senior who was apprenticing as a Healer to find Mrs. Murphy, and only when the nurse appeared did Larry and his friends leave, without saying a word.

Alexandra's friends waited outside while Mrs. Murphy inspected her. "These burns are serious. They'll take a few days to heal even with magic." She cupped Alexandra's chin in her large, warm hand. "I can reset your teeth and mostly prevent bruising. Miss Quick, I know dueling injuries when I see them, though I must say, you've been particularly careless. How did you get burned like that? Was there some foul play involved?"

"No, ma'am," Alexandra said. "We were just practicing a few basic Charms, and -"

"Spare me. I'll have to report this to the Dean. Don't look at me like that - any injury severe enough that you'd be scarred without magical Healing is too serious for me not to report it. I won't tell her tonight, though, so you have until tomorrow at least to work on a better story."

Alexandra was relieved that Mrs. Murphy didn't insist on making her spend the night in the infirmary. She walked out feeling much better, slathered with Burn and Bruise Ointment. A dose of Pain-Away felt like it was burning her from the inside out as it spread through her body and lightened her step.

William, Innocence, David, Sonja, and Torvald were waiting for her. They walked with her as far as the stairs to Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall.

"Listen," Alexandra said, "I want everyone to promise me something. Don't go past the wards around the school."

"What wards?" William asked.

"Just stay within school boundaries. I mean it. I think there's something dangerous out there."

Everyone stared at her, then nodded as she fixed them with her most serious expression. It wasn't very serious as the Pain-Away was making her a little cross-eyed.

Innocence and William left together. David looked between Alexandra and Torvald and said, "See you tomorrow, then," and slunk off to the ninth grade boys' dorms. Sonja winked at them both and went upstairs.

"You were okay," Alexandra said. "You didn't embarrass me too much."

"Oh, well, thank you." Torvald eyed the pinkish skin of her shoulder visible through her burned clothing. "So, nothing too burned and bruised under there?"

"Why, do you want to see?"

He cocked his head sideways. She reached up to take his face in her hands, and kissed him, a full open-mouthed kiss despite the fact that they were standing right in front of a stairwell and likely to be interrupted at any moment. His hands squeezed her waist as if he were afraid to let go. He was as breathless as she was when they parted.

"There has to be some place here in school that's nice and private," she murmured.

"Now?" Torvald coughed. "I think you should sleep off that potion. I can taste it."

"You weren't complaining while your tongue was in my mouth." Alexandra swayed a bit. "I mean after my skin heals."

Torvald raised an eyebrow. "Some place nice and private...?"

She gave him another kiss - this one only on his lips, and not as long - and told him good-night.

Sonja, of course, was waiting upstairs, all eagerness and concern. Alexandra made her promise again that she and Stuart would definitely not be going into the woods, and told her she would ask her about Herbology and Astrology the next day.

---

Even by the next morning, Anna did not quite believe that Larry hadn't attempted to kill Alexandra. Alexandra found it frustrating that her roommate was more worried about Larry than the thing in the woods.

During her third period Charms class, a note arrived summoning her to the Dean's office. Miss Marmsley told her brusquely to wait "in her usual spot." Alexandra had just sat down on the bench outside the Dean's office when the door opened and Larry emerged, looking sullen. He and Alexandra exchanged looks, but neither of them said anything.

"Come in, Miss Quick," said the Dean.

Alexandra entered the Dean's office. She looked around for Galen.

"Galen is outside at the moment," Ms. Grimm said. "She likes to get some fresh air now and then."

Alexandra was seized with a sudden fear. "Don't let her outside! There's something in the woods."

"There are many things in the woods, Miss Quick. I assure you, Galen is perfectly safe. She never wanders far from the school."

Alexandra wanted to argue, but Ms. Grimm cut her off. "Speaking of the woods, what were you and your friends doing there?"

"We didn't cross the school boundaries."

"And you weren't dueling Mr. Albo?"

Alexandra paused. "Is that what he said we were doing?"

Ms. Grimm smiled in a way that expressed no humor. "I'm asking *you*, Miss Quick."

"We weren't dueling." She paused, as Ms. Grimm's eyes turned hard and cold. "Ma'am."

"How did you get beaten and burned?"

"An accident. Just kids goofing off with Charms - you know. Ma'am."

"I know that Mr. Albo and his friends and yours have all given me the same story. I rarely see such... solidarity." Ms. Grimm made a note on a slip of parchment on her desk. "I'm giving you a week's detention."

Alexandra's mouth dropped open. "For what?"

"Because we both know what you were doing out there, so don't push your luck by arguing with me." Ms. Grimm slapped her hand on her desk. "Stay out of the woods and cease your unauthorized activities, immediately. Your friends' loyalty is the only thing that's kept me from having to suspend you, or have you forgotten that you're on probation?"

"Larry Albo isn't my friend."

"Evidently not. Mrs. Murphy told me your shoulder would have been permanently scarred had you not sought immediate Healing. Yet you say you were 'goofing off' and Mr. Albo says they were kindly instructing underclassmen in the finer points of Fireproofing Charms, and how very bad he felt for not realizing what a slow learner you are."

The heat that rose to Alexandra's face also warmed her shoulder and made it tingle uncomfortably. "There is something in the woods, ma'am. I think it's something that I fought in Din~~o~~tah. I think it's being kept back by the anti-Dark wards, but it's really dangerous and hard to kill. I dropped a burning building on it -"

"Are you suggesting that a Dark creature has followed you here all the way from the Indian Territories?"

"Why don't you try believing me just once, *Aunt* Grimm?"

The Dean gave her a long look. "Do not presume to invoke our relationship like that."

Alexandra fumed, clenching her fists.

"I'll have Miss Gambola and Ms. Shirtliffe check the woods," the Dean said. "And I'll mention your suspicions to Diana. Now you try heeding my advice just once, Alexandra. No more unauthorized dueling, and stay inside the wards, which should keep you safe if there is in fact something out there."

Alexandra glared at her.

Ms. Grimm placed her hand on the parchment on her desk. "I want your word, Alexandra. Or else I will have no choice but to suspend you."

Alexandra wondered what her aunt would do if she and Torvald were caught engaging in more questionable activities than unauthorized dueling. "I promise, ma'am."

---

Alexandra spent the next week doing detention in the kitchen. This was generally the most hated detention duty, because it meant taking orders from elves, who delighted in giving naughty children the most skin-peeling, knuckle-scraping, finger-wearing, sweaty and backbreaking chores available. Mr. Remy, the elf in charge of the other kitchen elves, did not let Alexandra sit idle or get away with doing only light work, but he was less abusive than he had been the first time she'd been sent to the kitchens. Alexandra tried to improvise scrubbing and levitating charms to mimic the ones the elves used to do their work so easily. She wasn't nearly as good at it as they were, but the elves were amused by her efforts.

The Sweetheart's Dance was the following weekend. The giddiness that infected students around Valentine's Day, which Alexandra had always found so annoying, now at least distracted her from her disappointment over having to end her illicit dueling practice.

She told Anna, David, and the Pritchards about what she thought she had seen in the woods. None of them were able to find a description in any book matching the monster-child Alexandra had encountered in John Manuelito's hogan, nor any clues to the magic

that might have created it. Not that they expected the Charmbridge library to divulge any secrets about Indian Dark Arts. Alexandra considered writing a letter to Henry Tsotsie, but remembering how skeptical he had been when she'd told him last time, and how harshly he had scolded her, she didn't think he'd even bother reading a letter from a meddlesome *belagana* witch.

The night of the Sweetheart's Dance, Alexandra and Anna took turns in front of Alexandra's magic mirror while Sonja occupied the bathroom.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Anna said. "It's only as a favor to David." Rather than the elegant style she had put her hair up in for the Winter Ball, she was keeping it long and straight, falling over one shoulder, but she had woven dark thread adorned with bits of jade and amber through it so it sparkled from every angle. She had cast a Makeup Charm which turned her face deathly white and made her lips that much redder and her eyes that much darker by comparison. She assured Alexandra this was how fashionable Chinese witches appeared beguiling. Alexandra thought it made her friend look a little like a vampire, but she didn't say so. In Alexandra's magic mirror, Anna's reflection tucked her chin into the hollow of her shoulder, batted her lashes, and radiated elegance and beauty, like a painted porcelain princess, but the real Anna was not nearly so accomplished in charming gestures and poses.

"You and David will look cute together," Alexandra said.

"Why don't you date him?" Anna said. "What the heck do you see in Torvald anyway?"

"I don't know." Alexandra took Anna's place in front of the mirror.

Alexandra wore sparkling earrings, and more makeup than she'd worn even to the Cotillion. The roots of her hair were growing out, but as the cursed white strands resisted a Coloring Charm, she instead Charmed her roots white. She had experimented with the albedo of her hair until it was shiny without being blinding. She wished Julia was here. The mirror was a great help, but Alexandra was quicker at learning hexes and counter-curses than she was at learning fashion and grooming tips.

Her reflection smiled a knowing, sultry smile. Alexandra's robes covered her shoulders and her neck. She would have liked to have

worn something less conservative, but her right shoulder was still a little tender and when viewed under the light, the skin where she'd been burned was pinker than the skin around it, and she couldn't quite hide the scar the monstrous mummy's beak had left on her neck with Makeup Charms. But the robes were in a modern style that clung to her body rather than hanging loosely about her like traditional witches' robes. They were hardly risque, and they were well within the rules of decorum at Charmbridge Academy, but by Old Colonial standards her outfit was rather bold, even with all her skin covered up.

Sonja knocked at the door and entered. Her hair was a glorious fiery red tumbling around her neck and shoulders like flames spilling out of a lantern, and her lips flickered as if reflecting firelight from within. She wore a robe that was in the same modern style as Alexandra's, but her curves were much bolder. She smiled at Alexandra. "Not bad, not bad at all. I don't think Torvald will be disappointed."

"I don't think Stuart will be either." Alexandra wondered if Sonja had cast a Glamour to make her breasts look bigger or if it was just her imagination. Probably the latter - minor Glamour charms for cosmetic purposes were allowed for formal occasions, but what the Charmbridge Code of Student Conduct called 'illusory body alterations' were strictly forbidden. While the line between 'cosmetic purposes' and 'body alterations' might be arbitrary, everyone knew that 'pumpkin boobs' (said to vanish at midnight) were an automatic detention.

"I hope not." Sonja smiled wickedly, or at least her reflection in the mirror looked wicked and twice as sultry as Alexandra's. She turned to Anna, and her smile took on a brighter edge. "You look... pale. And adorable. Very adorable."

"Thank you," Anna said.

"Carol, come on," Sonja said, beckoning impatiently behind her. Her roommate stepped timidly into Alexandra and Anna's room, blinking without the benefit of her glasses. She looked like a mouse wrapped in colorful gauze.

"If Dylan tries to lay a hand on you, tell me or Alex," Anna said.

"I'm sure Carol and I can handle Dylan just fine," Sonja said.

"You'd better, since you set her up with him," Anna said. "Carol, Sonja told you that Dylan has wandering hands, right?"

"She didn't need to," Carol mumbled. "You told me, many times."

Everyone went downstairs to find their dates. David and Dylan were both wearing single-layered robes that barely hid the Muggle clothing underneath. Torvald was dressed in a more casual style than he had been for the Winter Ball, but his dark cloak was neatly pressed and his shirt was starched and perfectly white. He drew a breath when he saw Alexandra, and whistled. "Well. You clean up nice, Troublesome."

"She almost looks hot," Dylan agreed, ignoring Sonja's incendiary look. Carol seemed unbothered.

"Jerk," Alexandra said, grabbing Torvald's arm.

"Him or me?" Torvald asked. Alexandra didn't answer.

Stuart was late. He finally came striding down the corridor in a long, flowing cloak over a formal vest, stiff, long-sleeved shirt, and sharp-creased dark pants, looking a bit distracted. He smiled at Sonja and kissed her on the cheek, without offering an apology, and everyone hurried off to the auditorium.

A wrock band from Dixie called *Webster and the Jury* played for the dance. Their music was energetic and loud and their instruments sent fiery sprites spinning through the air and conjured flaming little homunculi that danced across the floor. They dressed in a wizard's conception of what Muggle rock and roll bands wore. Some of their lyrics bordered on profane. The faculty chaperones were uneasy, and a couple of the Assistant Deans were positively scandalized. The students loved them.

The night passed in a pleasant jumble of loud music and colorful charms and dancing. The Rashes were there with Constance and Forbearance, mostly standing uncomfortably off the dance floor and scowling at Innocence, who gleefully kicked up her heels and danced with William, swishing her skirt back and forth and ignoring the strands of yellow hair that came loose as she danced. Constance was obviously itching to drag Innocence away, but she argued with Benjamin when he seemed about to do that.



Alexandra and Anna traded partners for one slow dance, and David danced once with a blushing Innocence before the sixth and seventh graders had to return to their rooms at ten p.m. Alexandra and Torvald pressed together as closely as the watching chaperones would allow. The adults used Repulsion Charms on couples violating what Alexandra considered their stupid, arbitrary rules about physical proximity, which did little except to encourage everyone to be more cunning and watchful of the adults.

Someone bumped into Alexandra while she and Torvald were trying to steal a kiss. Annoyed, she turned to see Larry looking just as irritated. His date was Galea Lewis, a pretty eleventh grade girl with her copper hair charmed to flicker and glow as if sparks were running through it, around and around like captured electricity.

"Merlin, I thought you had better taste," Larry said, giving Alexandra and Torvald a disgusted look before turning away. His girlfriend laughed and pressed her lips to his.

The room was steamy because of all the dancing inside an enclosed space on a winter night, and Alexandra and Torvald were both sweating a little when the last dance ended. She was flushed, and annoyed that Mr. Calvin and Mrs. Price and half a dozen other Assistant Deans and teachers were watching every student carefully as they flowed out of the auditorium, warning them that the hall monitors would be accounting for every student on each floor. She didn't feel like going back to her room.

Torvald took her by the hand. Surprised, she followed him as he took a left turn instead of a right when leaving the main hallway, and they darted down a corridor that ran behind the kitchen in the opposite direction of their dorms. It was mostly a hall of locked doors, but behind a large marble bust of some warlock that had been consigned to the disused end of the hallway, they were shielded from the view of the main corridor. The locked door behind them was solid and had traces of dust along its edges - one of the many doors in Charmbridge Academy that weren't opened frequently. Torvald pressed Alexandra against it, and when she didn't push him away, but merely turned her face up to breathe heavily on his neck, he pressed his mouth against hers.

At the dance, touching was forbidden except for hand-holding or arms around waists and shoulders. The chaperones would occasionally let a kiss on the cheek or even a peck on the lips slip

by. Neither of them were so restrained now - their hands were on each other, like their kissing hungry and without much finesse.

Alexandra pulled Torvald's hands away first. "This isn't a good place. An elf or a teacher is going to check the side corridors. Stop it." She slapped his hand when he persisted.

"Where?" he asked.

"Not tonight," she said, with no small amount of regret. "They'll probably actually do a bed check or something. Stupid - like being extra-vigilant right after a dance means no one will sneak out the rest of the year."

"That's adults for you," Torvald said. He sounded even more frustrated than her, but he didn't disagree. "Are you - are we actually talking about - you know?"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?" The slow, ponderous voice made them both jump and quickly step away from one another, straightening their robes and smoothing their hair back. But there was no one else in the corridor.

"Who said that?" Alexandra asked.

"YOUR BEHAVIOR IS VERY INAPPROPRIATE," said the voice again, pronouncing the words very slowly, so the last word came out like a series of pops: 'In-ap-pro-pri-ate.'

"Oh crud," Torvald said. It was the marble bust. They couldn't see its eyes in the shadows, but they could make out its stone lips moving.

"What are you, a voyeur, you stone-headed creep?" Alexandra said.

"CERTAINLY NOT," the bust said, with slow, grinding indignation. "I CAN-NOT SEE YOU."

"Really?" Alexandra elbowed Torvald and gestured for him to crouch low. Giving her a puzzled look, he did. She pushed him ahead of her, toward the light of the main corridor.

"TELL ME YOUR NAMES," said the stone bust.

"Galea Lewis and Larry Albo," Alexandra said. "Please don't report us, blockhead!"

"I MUST," the blocky head said gravely. Alexandra and Torvald both stumbled out into the main corridor, snickering, and looked around. Students, mostly juniors and seniors, were still wandering about, taking their time getting back to their rooms since they had no curfew. Larry was standing with his date near the main doors, which had been left open for the band to haul its instruments out with the help of Clockworks. He eyed Alexandra and Torvald and their state of dishevelment and leered.

"That was wicked," Torvald said.

"We'd better go back to our rooms," Alexandra said. And added, "No" when he leaned in to kiss her.

"So, what we were talking about..."

She was still a little breathless, still hot and flushed. "Tomorrow night," she whispered. Tomorrow was Sunday. "Where we met for dueling practice."

"Outdoors?"

"Dress warm."

She returned to her room. Anna had already undressed and returned her face to its normal healthy color. She gave Alexandra a wordless appraisal.

"We were saying good-night," Alexandra said.

"Uh huh," Anna said.

"Did you have a good time?" Alexandra asked.

"Not as good as you."

Alexandra took off her earrings and began undoing her own Makeup Charms. "I think I'm going to do it," she said quietly.

Anna was very still. "With Torvald?"

"Why not with Torvald?"

"Do you love him?"

Alexandra set down her wand. The question struck her as faintly ridiculous. "It's not like I'm going to marry him."

"I didn't think you even liked him that much."

Alexandra turned to her friend. "I just..."

Anna waited.

"I don't see the point in waiting," Alexandra said.

Anna took a deep breath, and when she spoke again, she sounded almost angry. "That sounds like a reason to do whatever you want for the next seven years."

"No, Anna, that's not it." Alexandra's mouth drew up in annoyance. "But I don't see why I *shouldn't* do whatever I want if it's not going to hurt anyone."

Anna looked away and folded her arms. Alexandra was a little surprised at Anna's attitude - sex wasn't something they had talked much about, mostly because until now, neither of them had been much interested in it.

"I don't need your approval," Alexandra said, "but I wish you wouldn't act like I'm doing something wrong. Like, say, sneaking into the Registrar's Office, or attending Mors Mortis Society meetings."

Anna's shoulders slumped, and she looked down. "I'm sorry. You're right, you don't need my approval."

"I think we should maybe not mention this to anyone else," Alexandra said. "I love Constance and Forbearance, but..."

Anna nodded in agreement.

"And David might get weird. Not that I think he has a thing for me, but he's kind of weird about everything." Alexandra got out of her robe, and frowned as she heard sniffing sounds from the bathroom and realized it was occupied and she couldn't use it.

"I wouldn't mention it to Sonja either," Anna said. "Besides the obvious reason, I don't think she wants to hear about anyone else's love life right now."

"What happened?" Alexandra asked.

"I'm not sure. But I think she and Stuart broke up."

## **The Parliament of Stars**

Sonja was quiet but composed the next morning. She didn't want to talk about the previous night, which told Alexandra that whatever had happened must have been rather serious. At the tenth graders' table, Stuart sat with some of his friends, back erect and stiff, not so much as glancing at the freshmen. Oddly, Torvald was sitting at the other end of the table from Stuart. He smiled when Alexandra looked his way, but he didn't come over to sit down next to her, and there was something uneasy about his expression.

The 'Alexandra Committee' met that afternoon. Forbearance insisted on making sure everyone was well-rehearsed in the ritual they were going to attempt the following weekend. Sonja was like a bubbling brook that had been dammed. Even her hair no longer glowed. Everyone tried to pretend they didn't notice, and Sonja for her part was as serious and businesslike as she had ever been. Even Innocence, who had been talking continuously about the dance - mostly to vex her sisters - became subdued.

Alexandra was burning with curiosity, and torn being feeling like she should be concerned for Sonja's sake and not wanting to be a hypocrite. After they left the library, she and Anna walked alongside the red-haired girl, and Alexandra said, "It's none of our business. But if you want me to put a curse on Stuart, just let me know. I totally will."

"She will," Anna said, "but please don't let her."

Sonja smiled at Alexandra. "It's fine. You're very sweet to offer, but I'd rather not talk about it. I made a fool of myself, that's all. I don't think Stuart will say anything to anyone. Please don't mention it again." And with her face darkening, she left a mystified Alexandra and Anna standing in the hallway as she hurried away.

"There's more to it than that," Alexandra said, thinking of how Torvald and Stuart had been sitting apart that morning. She hoped whatever drama had embroiled them wasn't going to affect her plans.

She spent the day studying, and writing missives to send by owl post.

The first was her enrollment as a Friend of HAGGIS, along with the substantial membership fee. They offered a discount for signing in

blood or enclosing a strand of hair. Alexandra wondered if anyone was foolish enough to do that; she wrote a check for the full amount, drawn on her CBNW account. Along with her enrollment, she wrote a letter inquiring about the possibility of a spokeshag visiting Charmbridge Academy to speak about hags' rights.

*If Dean Grimm forbids it, she thought, they can't blame me for not completing my Citizenship Project.*

She wrote a very long letter to Julia explaining everything that had happened since her last letter, and then laid out her reasons why she thought it would be best if she didn't go back to Larkin Mills, and instead stayed with the Kings when she wasn't in school. She pleaded with Julia to intercede for her with Ms. King, and also asked if it would be possible for her to come to Croatoa over spring break if she paid for the trip herself.

Her next letter was a briefer one to Livia, asking if she had done anything about the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse yet.

Finally, with mutters and frowns and much erasing, she wrote a very brief note to her oldest sister:

*"Dear Claudia,*

*I am fine.*

*I'm glad you and Livia are talking.*

*I would like to go to Croatoa over spring break. I don't need money, and I didn't ask the Kings for any. Please send me a note giving me permission. Thank you. Alex."*

She had calculated how much a two-way Portkey trip would cost, and it was most of what was in the CBNW account her father had given her.

Her final letter was to the Colonial Bank of the New World. She requested that all the funds in her account, less her HAGGIS membership fee and what she expected to pay for the Portkey tickets, be converted to dollars and sent to Ron Pete of Orange Rock, New Mexico, c/o Henry Tsotsie of the Din~~o~~tah Auror Authority.

She still didn't know exactly how much a car engine cost, but by her calculations, after subtracting conversion and transaction fees, she was probably still going to owe Ron Pete quite a sum.

She sent the owls that afternoon, and encountered Torvald after coming down the stairs from the aviary. He was without Stuart and looked somewhat glum, but he brightened when he saw her. The two of them looked around for any snooping students or wandering faculty, then exchanged a kiss in the middle of the hallway before pulling apart.

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?" he asked.

"No, have you?" Alexandra replied.

He grinned. "Not a chance."

"Okay then. See you tonight." Both of them walked away with a great show of casualness, while Alexandra's heart pounded.

That evening after dinner, she put several thick blankets in her backpack. She wore her weatherproof boots, outdoor robes, and cloak. She acted as if she were just going for a hike or one of her unauthorized dueling meetings, but her face was hot and her mouth was dry and second thoughts kept bouncing around in her head. Maybe Anna had a point. She didn't think she *loved* Torvald. And she didn't have to have sex now. Even if it was safe inside the boundaries of Charmbridge's wards, it wasn't exactly the best time to be sneaking out with a lover. She told herself all this, but said none of it to Anna, who watched her silently.

When Alexandra let Charlie out the window with instructions to wait for her, Anna finally spoke. "So if you don't show up for breakfast, should we go looking for you?"

"We won't be out all night." Alexandra gave her friend a hug. "I know you don't approve."

"Well, I do think this is dumb. But if you really want to, you're going to do what you want to do." Anna bit her lip. "I just don't understand - why Torvald?"

"He's... interesting." Alexandra didn't have a better answer. Anna shook her head.



"I'll tell you all about it." Alexandra tucked her pack under her arm and went to the door.

"I don't think I need to hear *all* about it," Anna said as Alexandra left.

It had been over a month since Alexandra returned to Charmbridge Academy. The moon was not full, but it was bright in the sky, and the snow sparkled beneath it. Alexandra didn't like the moon's brightness. It would be easy for anyone looking out a window to see her. She wished for something like an Invisibility Cloak, or better yet, that she could simply Apparate across Charmbridge's grounds as the older kids did.

She wasn't entirely satisfied with finding a cozy spot at the very edge of Charmbridge's wards. There were snowbanks enough to hide in, and with Burrowing and Warming Charms, they could make quite a cozy niche for themselves, perfectly warm and invisible from more than a few feet away. She'd had plenty of chances to test such spells, and nothing about the outdoors intimidated her - except perhaps something lurking in the woods, waiting for her. But she refused to think about that tonight. It was no more substantial than the Hodag.

Charlie settled on her shoulder, and Alexandra said, "You'd better watch out for me tonight of all nights, Charlie. If we get caught, it will be really bad."

"Troublesome," Charlie said.

"Big trouble." Alexandra pet the bird. Charlie, at least, did not have Anna's judgmental attitude.

Alexandra's misgivings increased when she saw Torvald crouching at the place she'd told him to wait for her, but so did her excitement. The prospect of losing her virginity did not bother her, only the possibility that she might not enjoy it, that Torvald wouldn't enjoy it, that Torvald would turn out to be a jerk about it, that they would get caught - Anna was right, this was dumb, there were so many logical reasons not to do this, and no reason at all to persist in this plan just because she'd gotten it into her head that she wanted to have sex.

Torvald rose to his feet, and let out a long puff of breath that frosted in the air before him. Then he wrapped his arms around her and they kissed, a long lingering kiss that made Alexandra lose most of

her misgivings. She wasn't in love with him and no, he wasn't very handsome, but he was still a boy, he felt like a boy, he smelled like a boy -

Charlie settled atop a pile of snow and for once observed silently.

"Are you ready?" Torvald asked.

"Are you?"

He grinned, a little nervously. "We're a little close to the school, aren't we?" From where they stood, they could see the lights across the field.

Alexandra nodded. "I wish we could go to the Glade, but I think that little trail that runs outside the riding path along the western edge has a lot of thick earth underneath the snow, and we can make a little... snow fort there."

"I wonder what the Glade is really like," Torvald said. He took her hand. They didn't often walk hand-in-hand, even when no one else was around, but she let him hold her hand as they strolled through the snow and Charlie flapped from bush to fencepost to snowdrift ahead of them. "I doubt even seniors are actually allowed to go there to... you know."

"If we're going to *do* 'you know,' maybe you should be able to say it," Alexandra said.

Torvald snickered. "I really don't think there's any girl like you at all."

"You mean a girl who wants to have sex with you? I believe that."

"Hey. What makes you think you're my first?"

That gave her pause. She had actually assumed this was the first time for both of them. Then she wondered if Torvald was assuming this wasn't her first time.

He cleared his throat. "Not that I'm saying I've been with a *lot* of girls..."

She snorted. He was so transparent. He hadn't done this before any more than she had. *Boys*. Teasingly, she said, "I always figured Stuart was the playboy."

Torvald pulled his hand away from her. "I don't want to talk about Stuart."

Alexandra was perplexed. "Sorry. I thought he had a fight with Sonja, not with you."

They walked in uncomfortable silence, then Torvald said, "Sonja didn't tell you?"

Alexandra shook her head.

"Well, at least I'm not the very last to know." Torvald snorted. "I was only his best friend for five years."

Alexandra frowned, but stayed silent as they kept walking.

"I can't believe I never had any idea," Torvald said, sounding disgusted now.

"Okay," Alexandra said, "do you want to talk about it or not? 'Cause if you're going to keep talking about it, then tell me what you're talking about. What's the deal with Stuart and Sonja?"

Torvald sighed. "The 'deal' is that poor Sonja wanted to... do it... with him. He must have gotten tired of lying. So he told her. Then he figured she'd tell everyone, so he told me. I guess Sonja hasn't said anything? Well, I'm certainly not going to talk about it."

"Talk about what?" Alexandra asked slowly.

"Stuart is... you know." He made a derogatory gesture with his hand. "A bent wand."

"A... bent wand?"

"You know. A pervert. Queer. *He likes boys!*" Torvald spoke with growing emphasis, as Alexandra kept staring at him as if she didn't understand what he was saying. "He admitted it! All these years, we've been friends and we've even undressed in front of each other, and I had no idea he was looking at me like *that*." Torvald grimaced. "Sorry. You see why I didn't want to talk about it? Talking about my sick freak of a roommate doesn't exactly put me in the moo-"

Alexandra's fist swung around and caught him under the chin. Torvald grunted and sprawled backward in the snow. He rubbed his

chin and gazed up at her in shock, but she was already stomping across the snow, back the way they'd come.

"Alexandra!" Torvald called. His voice was unsteady, full of confusion and hurt.

She ignored him and kept walking, her mind a storm of angry, painful thoughts. She rubbed her eyes and sucked in cold lungfuls of air, welcoming the harsh chill. Charlie refused to leave her, and remained on her shoulder rather than flying to wait outside her window before she went inside. Alexandra ignored everyone who stared at her as she left a trail of melting snow all the way back to her room with the raven on her shoulder.

Anna was surprised when Alexandra returned barely half an hour after she'd left. She sat up and muttered a word that lit the lamp by her bed. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine." Alexandra threw her pack on the floor. Charlie fluttered to a bed post. Even Nigel stirred in his terrarium, as if Alexandra's agitation had somehow transmitted itself to the snake.

Anna got out of bed, alarmed. "You don't look okay."

"Torvald's an asshole!"

Anna became more alarmed. "What did he do?"

Alexandra shook her head. "He didn't do anything. We didn't do anything."

"What happened?"

"Big fat jerk," Charlie said.

Alexandra sat down and told Anna about the argument - or rather, what Torvald had said, and her reaction - and realized that Anna was as confused as before.

"I never told you about Max," Alexandra said quietly.

"Max? I don't understand."

"Max... was queer." Alexandra met Anna's eyes. "Martin told me, after Max died."

Anna's eyes widened. "You mean, the two of them...?"

"Yes." Alexandra was tense, wondering if Anna would recoil or make a face. She didn't really know what Chinese wizards thought of gay people, but Anna's father was very traditional and very conservative.

Anna just wrinkled her brow. "Torvald couldn't have known."

"No, but he's still an asshole."

"I guess that means you're not going to sleep with him, then."

Alexandra just stared at Anna's flat expression for a moment, then laughed. Anna's lips curled upward slightly, as Alexandra gave her a hug.

"Am I the biggest idiot ever, or what?" Alexandra looked at Charlie. "Don't you dare memorize that!"

"Bird-brain," Charlie said.

Alexandra lay in bed for a long time that night. It bothered her how easily all the anger had come boiling up again. She had thought Maximilian's memory could no longer hurt her. Of course she still missed him, and she still grieved for him, but Torvald's unthinking callowness - which, honestly, she knew was probably how just about everyone in school thought - had made the pain fresh.

The incident made her a little more clear-headed in other ways. Whatever mixture of lust and attraction had been blinding her for the past few weeks seemed like a fog that was now lifting, making her feel silly and foolish. She buried her face in her pillow. Shame, embarrassment, grief, and anger all tormented her that night and kept her from getting much sleep.

---

Torvald watched her as she entered the cafeteria with Anna the next morning, but he did not venture over to her from his table. She hoped that pointedly refusing to look in his direction would keep him away.

Constance and Forbearance joined Alexandra and Anna. Alexandra didn't ask how they'd obtained 'permission' from Benjamin and Mordecai. The Rashes sat at the juniors' table with the other Old

Colonials as if there was nothing unusual about the Pritchards not joining them.

Forbearance wanted Alexandra and Sonja to come to their room that night "...to practice the Namin' o' the Stars."

Alexandra lowered her voice. "Naming of the Stars?"

"Conjurin' with Names is a rig'rous work," Forbearance whispered. "Even with the Names the Grannies gave us."

"Forbearance and I are working on a new astrological chart," Sonja said, "but we have to make sure everything is aligned right, and I don't know the Naming stuff myself -"

"We can't bobble it," Forbearance said.

"Okay. Fine." Alexandra was happy to have a distraction from the events of the previous night.

When she left the cafeteria with Anna, Torvald followed them, and called Alexandra's name when they got outside.

She and Anna turned around and presented him with matching expressions of cold hostility.

Torvald said, "Come on, can we talk? If you want your friend to listen, she can."

"My friend has a name," Alexandra said. "And she doesn't need your permission."

Torvald stood there, helpless and at a loss for words. Alexandra's expression softened in spite of herself.

"I'll meet you in class," Anna murmured.

"You don't have to go," Alexandra said.

"I know." Anna gave her a small smile, and walked past Torvald.

Alexandra tossed her head. "Okay. We've got five minutes until the first period bell."

Torvald reached for her arm, stopped when she drew back and gave him a warning look, then walked slightly ahead of her. She followed him, turning left down the same corridor they had taken away from the main hallway the night of the dance. It was still empty, but this time Alexandra could see the large stone head more clearly. According to the plaque on the pedestal, it was a bust of Franklin Percival Brown, once Charmbridge Academy's Deputy Assistant Plumber. Normally Alexandra would have been amused and curious, but she just pointed her wand at the big, round head and said, "*Fleer*." A fat pink bubble emerged from the tip of her wand and flew into the sculpture's face, bursting and covering its eyes with sticky goo.

The marble lips moved. "RE-MOVE THIS IM-MEDI-ATE-LY."

She filled the statue's ears with sticky pink stuff as well, then turned back to Torvald.

"I didn't know you could do that with that spell," Torvald said, while Franklin Brown continued complaining, in a low, grating voice that didn't carry far.

"Four minutes," Alexandra said coolly.

Torvald took a breath. "Okay. I've been thinking about what happened, and I think I figured it out." Alexandra's expression didn't change and she said nothing, so he went on. "You have a friend who's - you know - queer, don't you? Or maybe even someone in your family."

"Figured that out, did you, genius?"

"All right." Torvald held up his hands. "I'm sorry about what I said. I mean, I didn't think maybe you might actually know someone... like that."

"A sick pervert, you mean?"

Torvald winced. "Alexandra, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult your friend, or relative, or whoever it is."

Alexandra raised her voice. "If someone said they can't stand Mudbloods, except my friends, would you expect me to say, 'Oh, that's okay then'?"

The marble bust wobbled back and forth slightly and rumbled, "WHO IS U-SING PRO-FANE LANG-UAGE?"

Torvald ignored the talking head. "Of course not. You know I'd never say anything like that! That's totally different." When Alexandra's expression only became darker and angrier, he said pleadingly, in the tone of someone seeking one last chance for reprieve, "He's my *roommate*, Alexandra! I mean, if people find out, they're going to think that the two of us..."

Alexandra stared at him in disgust, then shook her head. "I'll tell you what. You can tell everyone you slept with me. I won't even deny it. Then no one will think you're queer."

Torvald's shoulders slumped. "That's not what I want."

"Well, I guess you can't have what you want."

"Alexandra..."

The bell for first period rang. Alexandra said, "I don't want to be late for class."

She walked past the indignant, trembling marble head of Franklin Percival Brown, leaving the gum for a Clockwork to clean up. She felt sad, but not as sad as she thought she would.

---

Alexandra still couldn't follow the star charts with which Forbearance and Sonja busied themselves that night. There were too many complicated astrological symbols, obscure little cantrips they used to generate rays and pinpoints of light on their scrolls, and measurements they had to take with little tools Alexandra didn't recognize.

But she paid close attention to the lines Constance and Forbearance recited, invoking the Names of the heavenly Powers, and in turn Naming Alexandra. The words of the ritual were not one- or two-word incantations, but lengthy verses, like the one Forbearance had used during their first attempt to draw down the stars. They were only practicing, and they'd carefully laid their wands aside, but Alexandra felt there was magic in their words nonetheless, especially when they spoke the Names of the Powers - and



particularly when they spoke *her* Name. Never before had "Troublesome" been anything more than an aggravating nickname. But Constance said:

*"Name yon sky and name yon Powers,  
And Troublesome name yon Stars Above."*

And Alexandra felt something like a reverberation in her heartbeat, like an echo in her breath.

"Did you just Name me?" she asked.

"No." Constance and Forbearance shook their heads together.

"Not done true, not yet," Constance said.

"But I reckon you felt a jolt, din't you?" Forbearance said.

Alexandra nodded. "You can do things to someone with their Name."

The twins exchanged one of those looks of unspoken discussion or whatever passed for argument between them.

"Speakin' a Name in an ill manner is Dark Arts," Constance said.

"But anyone who knows my Name could do it," Alexandra said.

"Well... if'n they was minded to try," Constance said.

"But Alex," said Forbearance, "it hain't a one-way road. Anyone who wishes a curse by your Name, you can serve back."

Alexandra didn't find this very reassuring. She plied the Pritchards with more questions. They answered as best they could, but the Grannies had only given them the basics of what they needed to know, and nothing about cursing or other Dark Arts.

"Obviously this is something else I need to learn about," Alexandra said, feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the magic she had resolved to study outside of what she was learning in class.

Sonja, who had been listening without comment, said, "Honestly, if someone's out to get you, there are more direct ways to do it, aren't there?"

Alexandra considered saying, "Someone *is* out to get me," but kept her mouth shut.

By the following weekend, she had made a list of every book about magical Names in the Charmbridge library, though she didn't have time to do more than browse through a couple. Naming was considered a complicated, arcane branch of magic with few practical uses in the modern era.

Of course, most books in the library said Powers didn't exist, and if they did, you certainly couldn't conjure with them.

On a cold, windy Saturday evening, seven students sneaked out of Charmbridge Academy through one of the exits near the stables. It was after dark but not yet curfew, though for the youngest member of their group it soon would be. Constance and Forbearance were more worried about keeping Innocence out past curfew than they were about the archaic, complicated, and possibly dangerous magic they were about to perform.

The ground was still covered with snow, though much of it had been trodden into mush near the school buildings. When they reached the small field they had chosen to do their ritual in, only a few yards from the nearest trees in the woods, the snow was knee-deep. Alexandra had brought Charlie, and Anna had brought Jingwei. The two birds took up watchful positions on opposite sides of the clearing. Alexandra was proud of Charlie for appearing *almost* unintimidated by the great owl without a cage between them.

"Make sure the Rashes don't sneak up on us this time," Alexandra said to the birds.

"They'uns got a test tomorrow," Constance said. "They's studyin'."

"They better be," David said.

Sonja and Forbearance consulted their charts beneath the light of their wands and, as before, carefully positioned everyone in a six-pointed star configuration around Alexandra.

Alexandra looked up at the stars, which were bright and clear on this winter night, and wondered if anything would happen this time.

"Are you ready, Alex, dear?" Forbearance asked.

Alexandra nodded.

Constance chanted the first part of the spell, the part that called the Stars Above using Troublesome's Name. The words were ambiguous; Alexandra could understand why the twins had not immediately realized that Alexandra was both subject and object. She could feel it, though - every time Constance said, "Troublesome," Alexandra knew it was *her* being Named.

Then Forbearance raised her hands over her head, gripped her wand in both hands, and chanted the same words as before to convene the Parliament of Stars.

Alexandra kept her eyes fixed on the sky. Trillions of miles away, the stars blazed with an indifference that was as cold as the gulf between them. Alexandra was lost in the vastness of distance and time, feeling the immensity of the universe and her own insignificance. The folly of thinking that a bunch of children with wands could call on such Powers! Never before, not even when facing the Most Deathly Power, had Alexandra felt so powerless, her wits and her will and her magical talent all amounting to a flicker of nothingness.

She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to suppress the shivers coming upon her. What she felt was more than fear; it was existential despair that struck at her confidence and sense of being.

She closed her eyes to block out the sight of the Stars Above, and that gave her a moment's reassurance. She was still planted here on this world, surrounded by her friends.

When she opened her eyes again, her friends were gone.

Alexandra's breath froze in her throat. She turned in a slow circle. Everyone was gone. She stood in an empty field of snow, exactly like the one she had been standing in a moment ago, except there were no footprints, no signs that anyone had ever crossed it. There were no lights in the distance where Charmbridge Academy stood. There was no wind, and there were no sounds from the trees, which

were black silhouettes, visible only by way of the stars they blocked from view.

"Hello?" Alexandra called out.

Constance and Forbearance and Innocence and Anna and David and Sonja were gone. Not even Charlie answered back. Alexandra was alone - the only living soul in the universe, as far as she could tell.

*We have endless time*

*But you see our light briefly*

*Through a small window.*

Alexandra started and spun around.

*Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes,*

*Twice she has called us,*

*But can't say what she knows.*

She turned her eyes upward. The stars had not changed in their appearance, but the two voices were distinct, both in tone and in the rhythm of their words. She had not *heard* them, precisely. But they were voices all the same.

"Are you the Parliament of Stars?" she asked. "My friends and I requested that you convene. We thought that you'd know my future and you might know how I can change it."

*Troublesome's arrogant, Troublesome's rude,*

*Troublesome hasn't learned humility,*

*Or even gratitude.*

This, Alexandra thought, was the same voice that had spoken the second time. She clenched her teeth, and in the vast empty spaces between the stars she heard a chorus like glass breaking and being blown about by the wind. She thought it was laughter. She could not tell if it was kind or unkind. It was alien.

"I'm... sorry," she said. "Thank you for... convening, and talking to me. I'll address you however you want me to address you, but I don't know what forms I should use. My friends and I had no idea what would happen if you actually did answer our summons. No one knows how to talk to Powers, or at least, they haven't written it down in a book."

There was that distant breaking sound again. Less like glass than sheets of ice fracturing off enormous glaciers and falling into the sea - thousands of them all at once. The image was as unbidden as the voices in her head.

*We do not convene at the behest of children, nor has any being the power*

*To demand our presence, to command us, to summon us like helpful elves.*

*It has been ages since wizards called us. It is late, the age, the hour.*

*But even so ancient and distant as we may please to amuse ourselves.*

Alexandra thought maybe that was a sonnet; she named this voice the Shakespeare Star. She still couldn't tell which stars were addressing her. They all glowed sharp and bright but no more alive to her eyes than they had been before, and she wasn't even sure she was actually hearing them with her ears.

She cleared her throat. "Can you please tell me if it's really my fate to die within seven years? And if it is, is there any way I can avoid it?"

*Troublesome's fate is written in the stars;*

*Troublesome's future is in her hands,*

*Her fate lies not in ours.*

Alexandra named that voice the Troublesome Star, since its short, sarcastic couplets always addressed her directly. "Does that mean I can change my future? If you know what it is, you must know how I can change it."

A new voice spoke, sounding jovial and a little more sympathetic than the Troublesome Star:

*There once was a girl named Troublesome, who got herself in trouble,*

*With no escape, she cheated and made her problems double.*

*Now she stands beneath the stars and asks the Powers for aid,*

*But some things are beyond our power; we can't help, I'm afraid.*

"What do you mean I cheated?" Alexandra asked. "And if you can't help, does that mean everything I do is predetermined?"

*We see but you choose*

*We see what you have chosen*

*All time is the same.*

She thought about what the Rhyming Star and the Haiku Star had said. They were talking about her future as if it had already happened. From their point of view, maybe it had.

"You know what choices I'll make," she said slowly. "But... what about free will? If I can't choose differently, that violates causality."

*Troublesome argues, Troublesome pleads,*

*Troublesome thinks reality*

*Will bend to her needs.*

Alexandra recalled the eerie, mysterious verses of the corn maidens she and Maximilian had encountered in the Lands Below. When she met the Most Deathly Power on her quest in the Lands Beyond, he had spoken in riddles, not verse, but he was just as confusing and used that same tone that made her feel small and slow-witted. Alexandra was finding that magical beings rarely expressed themselves directly, and the more powerful they were, the more likely they were to cloak themselves in inscrutable, mystic obfuscation.

They all seemed to like testing her. Come to think of it, talking to Powers was not unlike talking to her father.

Ice and glass crashed together again in that distant void between the stars. Alexandra felt certain that she was being mocked. But when the Shakespeare Star spoke again, it was solemn:

*We did not pronounce the fate apportioned to your Name*

*Each soul is influenced by us, but we do not steer them*

*The moon brings the tides, and so drowns men; is it to blame?*

*The Stars Above are the greatest of Powers, but do not fear them.*

*All that falls within our orbit is ours to see,  
Our domain is limitless, our sight expands forever,  
But we do not craft fate and destiny  
We know and when it please us, warn, but command never.*

*Ages pass and you grow more distant, your light fleeting  
You close doors and windows, shuttering the light we shed.  
You who once called us often, now rarely meeting  
Prefer a world of atoms where magic has fled.*

*It is no tragedy for us; we are eternal  
You will feel our absence in time.  
The source of your tragedy is paternal  
You cannot hide until the end of time.*

*Your father knew when you were born  
The Stars Above whose spheres he'd scorn.*

The long sonnet was abstruse to her; she pondered the Shakespeare Star's words as it spoke, but she couldn't catch everything. Was it complaining or simply observing? Did these Powers want something from her, or was she just a momentary amusement to them? They denied they were responsible for anything that happened to her. The verse about a world where



magic has fled confused her - magic certainly hadn't fled her world!  
But the last two lines were what caught her attention.

"My father knew when I was born that I'd have this destiny, this...  
Geas on me? That I would be doomed?"

*All are doomed, yes, all*

*Even we, the Stars Above*

*Come the end of time.*

The Haiku Star, Alexandra thought, was not very helpful.

"So you can't help me," she said, with a feeling of defeat. *Or won't.*

*Troublesome has questions, but answers are not free.*

*Swear a service to us, and we'll answer*

*Three.*

Alexandra thought about that. "Three questions? About anything?"

*As we told you, our orbits encompass the sky,*

*All that's beneath it, we espy.*

*The lands that are not are beyond our sight,*

*But we know all seen by day or by night.*

They couldn't tell her anything about Death, then, or the Lands Beyond. Nor could they tell her what was happening in the Lands

Below. That probably meant they could tell her little about the Generous Ones, and nothing about how to escape her fate.

And yet... three questions about anything else. And she had so very many questions.

Alexandra paced. Beneath the Stars Above, the snow was uniformly pale white and she had some satisfaction in feeling it crunch beneath her feet. Wherever she was, whether another realm, like the Lands Below and the Lands Beyond, or just a dream, or somehow still outside of Charmbridge Academy, next to the woods, the ground still felt solid and the snow still felt cold. That, she thought, proved she was still alive and that this was real. It wasn't a proof that would hold up in Ms. Shirtliffe's Magical Theory class, but Alexandra would turn that over in her mind later - maybe.

She was ready to swear, and then remembered her promise to Quimley.

"What service do you want?" she asked. "What could I possibly do for the Parliament of Stars?"

Far across space, in a cold orbit where sunlight barely reached, heavenly bodies collided, fractured, splintered, shedding immense fragments of ice in a soundless collision. This image came to Alexandra's mind as the image of shattering glass and crumbling icebergs had come before - the sound of distant stellar laughter, this time without any sound at all.

*When you take a life*

*And your life is at an end*

*Hold open the door.*

Alexandra blinked slowly. She took a deep breath, and realized for the first time that she couldn't actually feel her own breath, nor did the air mist in front of her face when she exhaled, despite the snow on the ground around her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't understand. I'm not planning to take any lives. What door do you want me to hold open?"

*Troublesome child, what we tell you was writ before you were born,  
You cannot choose to change your fate, only the choice you make.  
You swore to treat with any Power, so make the bargain sworn,  
Hold open a door you won't pass through, and another path take.*

Alexandra wanted to shout in frustration. She brought her fingers to her temples and rubbed them. Why did they have to speak in riddles? There were no crashing ice sounds now, no cosmic laughter from the heavens. It was as if suddenly the Stars Above were shining very intently on her, awaiting her answer. They wanted her to swear to do something that they could not do themselves.

What had Quimley said? Think once, think twice.

She didn't know exactly what it was the Stars Above were asking her to do - if she understood the cryptic sonnet of the Shakespeare Star, she probably wouldn't understand it until the moment it happened. And then what? What if she found out, at that time, that what she had sworn to do was not what she wanted to do? What if it was something that she would do anything to avoid?

The Haiku Star had implied they only had a little time. And Alexandra suspected the Stars Above would not have infinite patience for bargaining and requests for clarification. But her initial eagerness had given way to uneasiness, even dread. Nothing the Powers had said lessened her sense of foreboding about her future, or offered much in the way of escape. She wondered why they needed her to hold a door open. She didn't like the talk about taking a life, either.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm not taking any lives, and I won't make a promise when I don't understand exactly what I'm promising."

The silence was endless and stretched beyond time. She thought perhaps those earlier sounds had not been laughter at all.

"If there's something else I can do for you -" she said, and then she was blinded by white light that filled the universe. The light of a million candles all blasting through her eyes and into her skull. The pain was intense, and she thought she would never see again, if she survived the burning of her brain. She was aware she was falling, though she never felt the ground.

The Power whose voice had been cruelest and whose rhymes had been the meanest uttered one last verse:

*Troublesome will take a life, so say the Stars Above.*

*Troublesome will save a life, but lose everything*

*You love.*

---

"Alexandra!" The voice was fearful, and another voice repeated the same cry, and then a third voice said her name, but this one was softer and closer to her ear.

"No," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry."

There was a brief silence. "Sorry for what? Alex, can you hear me?"

Alexandra reached a hand out and felt a face. Another hand pressed against hers and held it there.

"Please say something, Alex," Anna said.

"Is it still night?" Alexandra asked.

There were people all around her. They moved and breathed and made small sounds: heavy robes and other winter clothing rubbing together, feet pressing into the snow, hot breath puffing in the air. Then she heard a flapping sound sharply in one ear, and felt little particles of moisture flung against the side of her head.

"Yes, Alex, dear, it's still night." Forbearance's voice was gentle and very worried. "You just fell down - it weren't but a moment ago."

Alexandra slowly opened her eyes. It took her two tries. The retinal image of burning white light seemed seared into her, and she was afraid she would see nothing but that bright, hot glow. She shuddered and sucked in a breath when she saw stars - an endless canopy of stars - scattered overhead, but much closer were the heads of her six friends gathered around her.

"Maybe we should take her to the infirmary," David said.

"Alexandra!" said Charlie, who was sitting in the snow next to her head.

"No." Alexandra pulled her hand away from Anna's face, who released it reluctantly. "I'm okay."

"You fainted," Sonja said.

Alexandra sat up. Multiple hands helped her, though she hadn't asked for help. Innocence crouched behind her and brushed snow and dirt off her back. Alexandra extended an arm to Charlie, who stepped onto her wrist and wrapped talons around it with a grip that would have drawn blood if her wrist hadn't been covered by a thick coat sleeve.

"I'm so dreadful sorry, Alexandra." Forbearance's voice quavered, and she was near tears. "This was a terrible foolish idea."

"What happened?" Alexandra asked.

Everyone looked at each other. Then Forbearance said, "Soon's we'uns completed the ritual -"

"You done swooned," Constance said.

"That's all you saw?" Alexandra asked.

Everyone nodded.

Alexandra closed her eyes, still saw white light against the insides of her eyelids, and opened them again. "I'm fine."

"Can you stand?" David asked.

"I'll help," Innocence said, and half a dozen pairs of hands reached for her, but Alexandra shrugged them all away. She stood up without

help, transferring Charlie to her shoulder as she did, and stood there a moment, then reached behind herself to brush snow off her butt.

"Did anything else happen?" Anna asked.

Alexandra almost shook her head, then said, "Yes."

A hush fell over the group. Even Charlie became still and silent.

"It worked, Forbearance," Alexandra said. "The ritual worked. But Constance was right. You shouldn't mess with Powers."

Constance seemed to take no comfort from this vindication.

Alexandra pressed a hand over her eyes, trying to forget that nova-like flare, and the last line of the rhyme. "I don't want to talk right now. Let's go inside."

## **A Great Work**

Alexandra was still in bed the next morning when Anna emerged from the shower.

Anna didn't say anything as Alexandra continued to lie in bed, but when she finished dressing, she said, "Alex? Shouldn't you be outside?"

It was a Monday morning; the JROC was doing their morning exercises, as they did every Monday morning, and Alexandra had missed formation.

"I'm not going," Alexandra said, with her eyes still closed.

"Are you sick?" Anna sounded worried, which was understandable - witches didn't often get sick. When they did, it was usually some magical malady.

"I don't feel like going," Alexandra said.

Anna was silent for several moments. Then she asked, "Won't you get in trouble?"

"Let Ms. Shirtliffe kick me out of the JROC. She already kicked me out of the Dueling Club."

Anna didn't say anything. After a moment, Alexandra heard her moving about the room again, slowly, taking a robe out of her closet and opening her drawer full of hair ornaments. There was the shuffling sound of books and parchment being stacked on a desk, and then a long silence. Charlie, attuned to Alexandra's mood, had not made a sound.

Finally, Anna spoke again. "Aren't you going to get breakfast?"

"No."

"Are you going to get dressed?"

"No."

"What about class?"

"I don't feel like going."

Anna was silent much longer this time. Finally she sat down on the edge of Alexandra's bed. "You know if you're too sick to go to class, you have to see Mrs. Murphy. Otherwise, Dean Calvert will send someone to check on you. You're on probation. You know what happens if you're caught cutting class."

Alexandra didn't say anything.

"Fine," Anna said, "I'll stay here with you."

"Then you'll get in trouble for cutting class," Alexandra said. "Won't your father kill you?"

"Well, at least you're not too depressed to be a jerk."

"Who said I'm depressed?"

"You wouldn't tell us anything last night. I figured you'd say something today. You don't have to if you don't want to. But don't lie in bed like that and pretend nothing is wrong. I've seen you being stubborn and I've seen you being secretive and I've even seen you cry." The smooth calm of Anna's voice broke. "But I've never seen you beaten. Even when you lose, you're never beaten."

Alexandra's eyes opened. She turned over slowly in bed. Anna's brown eyes were moist.

"After Maximilian died," Alexandra said, "I never gave up. You know how hard it was for me to accept he was never coming back. It was the hardest thing in the world. Even being told I have only seven years to live wasn't as bad as losing Max."

Anna nodded slowly. "I know."

"I can't do it again."

Anna's eyes widened. "Do what?"

Alexandra suppressed a shudder. "Watch someone else die because of me. Lose someone else. I'd rather let the Generous Ones take me now than -"

"Stop it!" Anna exclaimed. Charlie squawked, stirred into commotion. "Max didn't die because of you. We've talked about this, Alex. What do you mean by someone else dying? What happened?"



Reluctantly, Alexandra told Anna about her audience with the Parliament of Stars, which for her friends had taken place in the single breath between the last word of Forbearance's spell and Alexandra's collapse. She couldn't remember everything the Stars Above had said - not precisely, with all their poems and obscure pronouncements - but the final verse as she fell to the ground, blinded by their anger, she remembered word for word:

*Troublesome will take a life, so say the Stars Above.*

*Troublesome will save a life, but lose everything*

*You love.*

Alexandra swallowed. "You. And Constance and Forbearance and Innocence. And David - I mean, he counts too. Don't tell him I said that."

"He knows," Anna said distractedly.

"And Julia." Alexandra blinked back tears. "Even Claud-" She stopped.

Anna's expression was thoughtful, but she wasn't looking at Alexandra. "Can the Stars Above control the future? Can they make something happen, or just tell you what's going to happen?"

"I don't know."

Anna's gaze settled on her. "Maybe we should find out."

"Anna -"

"Did they say someone was going to die because of you? No. They just said you'll lose everything you love. Did they say when? No. Alex -" Anna put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder. Her voice softened, became reassuring and steady. "If you live the rest of your life - not just seven years - you will lose people you love, won't you? I mean, most people do. No one wants to think about it, but..." She looked down. "Someday, our parents will probably pass away. And by the time you're old, you'll have outlived other people you know. And when you die, you'll leave everything behind. Everyone does."

"I don't think that's what the Powers meant, Anna."

"How do you know? Maybe they were just being spiteful. You said you rejected their bargain. I guess heavenly Powers would be pretty ticked off that a fourteen-year-old girl told them no. But if they can't control your destiny, then maybe all they can do is tell you bad things are going to happen. So, someday people you love will die. I could say the same thing to anyone, and I'd probably be right. Does that make me a Seer? Did they say I'm going to die, or one of your sisters?"

Alexandra winced. "No."

"Of course not. Heck, they're hardly better than Sonja and Forbearance's Astrology. Heavenly Powers my heels!"

Alexandra said reproachfully, "You make it sound like it's nothing."

"Maybe it is nothing. Maybe it isn't. We should probably talk to Forbearance about this. And Constance, and maybe David -"

"Why not just bring in the entire Alexandra Committee?"

"Good idea." Anna smiled. Then her smile faded. "What are you going to do, lie in bed waiting to see who dies? I've just never seen you give up."

Alexandra frowned. "I'm not giving up."

Anna said nothing.

Alexandra looked at Charlie, who looked back at her with bright, beady black eyes.

"Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes," Charlie said.

Alexandra sat up, throwing off her covers. "Whatever," she muttered. As Anna watched hopefully, she got out of bed.

Before going to the bathroom, she turned to her friend. They regarded one another for a long moment, until they heard voices in the next room - Sonja and Carol returning from the cafeteria to their room just before class, and probably to find out why neither Alexandra nor Anna had been to breakfast.

"Sorry I made you miss breakfast," Alexandra said.

"It's okay," Anna said.

Alexandra gave Anna a fierce hug, not caring what sort of spectacle it would present to Sonja if she burst in at that moment to find Alexandra still in her pajamas, looking a mess with her hair disheveled, and Anna already showered and dressed in her nice school robes with her hair tied in a bun.

"I do love you," Alexandra said.

"I know. I love you, too."

Alexandra let go of her and ran a hand through her unwashed hair. She only had a few minutes to clean up and put on her JROC uniform if she wasn't going to be tardy to first period. She went into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth, while Anna waited for her.

---

Alexandra lingered after the end of her second period Advanced Magical Theory class, letting Anna and the Pritchards go on ahead of her. Ms. Shirtliffe had not said anything about her absence that morning. In fact, she had hardly acknowledged Alexandra's presence at all. But when Alexandra approached her, the uniformed teacher said, "I assume you have a note from Mrs. Murphy explaining your absence from morning exercise, Quick?"

"No, ma'am."

"So I suppose you're about to give me an explanation."

"I overslept, ma'am."

Ms. Shirtliffe had been gathering her notes and the one book she used in class, but now she gave Alexandra a sharp look, taking in her barely-pressed uniform and untidy hair. "You look like it. That's your excuse? You overslept?"

"It's not an excuse, ma'am. I need to ask you something."

Ms. Shirtliffe folded her arms. "All right."

"Suppose, hypothetically -"

"Quick, I'm already ticked off at you and now you're going to waste my time with hypothetical questions?"

Alexandra stood straight and tried not to let the teacher intimidate her. She didn't entirely trust Ms. Shirtliffe - there were no adults she trusted entirely - but Shirtliffe had always been straight with her.

No, that wasn't entirely true. The JROC commander had known about Alexandra's father all along. But she had also been the first to tell Alexandra that she regretted keeping that from her.

"I need to do some magic that isn't in any books," Alexandra said. "Probably really powerful magic. I need your help."

The older witch's face didn't change, showing neither surprise nor skepticism. "What kind of magic? Is this about your mother?"

Of course Ms. Shirtliffe knew about her mother. Alexandra fought to keep her own face free of surprise or other emotions. "No ma'am. I mean, yes, I want to cure her, too. But that's not what I need your help for. I want to change my future."

"That's easy. Make decisions now about what you want your future to be like. For example, waking up on time and preparing your uniform properly would mean fewer broom drills in your future."

"I mean a future that's been... pronounced."

Ms. Shirtliffe made a sound of exasperation. "Do you mean prophecies? Have you and your friends been experimenting with fortune telling and astrology? That's all nonsense, Quick. Real, bona fide Seers are rarer than rare. There are a dozen cranks hanging out shingles in the Goblin Market for every individual who's ever had a single genuine vision in their life, and -"

"Ma'am, I'm not talking about Seers or prophecies," Alexandra said, impatient because the bell for the next period was about to ring. She hurried on before the teacher could admonish her for interrupting. "I mean a future pronounced for me by..." She hesitated, then plunged ahead: "The Stars Above."

Ms. Shirtliffe rubbed the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "Fairy tales, Quick."

"No, ma'am. Powers are real. I may not be able to prove it to you, but I know. I don't mean I believe in them, I mean I *know*." Alexandra held the teacher's gaze, and Ms. Shirtliffe slowly lowered her hand and regarded Alexandra thoughtfully.

"I also need to know about gates," Alexandra said.

"What do you mean by 'gates'?" Ms. Shirtliffe asked.

"Gates like the ones under Charmbridge," Alexandra replied levelly. "I think you know what I mean. Don't tell me those aren't real either. Ma'am."

She couldn't read Ms. Shirtliffe's reaction. Her jaw was tight again, the creases in her face making her scar even more pronounced.

"So, you think Powers are real and have taken a personal interest in *your* future," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "And you want to tamper with magic you should be staying the hell away from for reasons you know well. And you want me to help you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"This new obsession of yours means you've probably found a new way to get yourself into trouble with a half-baked scheme, which means you are inevitably going to wind up in the Dean's office again before the end of the year. We can only hope it's not after someone else has been hurt." The teacher held up a hand to forestall Alexandra's protests. "But maybe, just maybe, you've found a purpose in life. If you really have a burning passion for this subject, it might lead you to undertake a Great Work."

"A Great Work?"

"That's what they called them in the old days. Usually the work of a lifetime. Not many wizards attempt one nowadays... modern magical folk seem content with the magic we've got. It's a very ambitious undertaking."

"So you'll help me?" Alexandra said hopefully.

The bell for third period rang.

"No," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "If you want to be taken seriously, start acting like you're serious. Don't be late to JROC drill, and do something about that uniform." She strode away.

---

Almost every waking hour that Alexandra wasn't with the JROC was now spent in class or studying. If it wasn't homework, it was her own uncertain attempts at research. In Mr. Grue's class, it seemed as if they were studying everything but what she really wanted to study. The one time she dared ask him about memory alchemy, he snapped at her that if she thought she knew better than him what potions she needed to master, she could leave his class and learn what she needed to on her own. She already had enough studying to do on her own, so she bit the inside of her cheek rather than snapping back, and resumed mixing rare metal tinctures.

After two weeks of this, with February coming to a chilly end, Alexandra decided she needed to get outside now and then to practice her dueling spells. She'd given Dean Grimm her word not to engage in any more unauthorized dueling, but she wasn't dueling anyone if she cast spells by herself.

Anna came with her sometimes, and Alexandra even talked her into practicing a few hexes, cast carefully at a tree stump or a fallen log, without venturing into the woods or blasting the still-abundant snow. A couple of times Sonja or David joined them, but were disappointed that Alexandra was keeping her promise and not dueling.

Innocence soon noticed Alexandra's night-time excursions as well, and one evening she and William showed up, eager to resume their dueling lessons. Alexandra reluctantly told them there would be no dueling, but they continued to come, asking Alexandra to help them improve their spellcasting. Alexandra decided she wasn't breaking her promise as long as they weren't pointing their wands at each other.

Without the lure of actual dueling, however, Alexandra was alone most evenings except for Charlie. On these evenings, she would walk close to the tree line and sometimes venture into the woods, listening and feeling. In this way, she traced the boundaries of the circle of protection around Charmbridge Academy, and sometimes felt as if she could reach out and touch the wards and feel their composition. They were, she thought, not dissimilar to the magic

used to create the Invisible Bridge. The idea struck her forcefully - when she crossed the Invisible Bridge for the first time, it had vanished, dropping her and David to what should have been their deaths.

Mr. Journey had engineered its failure. Only briefly, but if Mr. Journey could undo a spell like that then others could too.

Her evening walks became a sort of meditation for her. She sensed something out in the woods beyond the wards. From the Stars Above, she sensed nothing.

During the first week in March, even Anna thought it was too cold to go outside, and William and Innocence didn't join her either, so Alexandra, expecting to be alone one evening, was considering a walk out to the limits of the protections around the school when Charlie cawed a warning from the air. These caws, once all alike, were becoming more distinct to Alexandra's ears. She could tell when Charlie meant "Danger, trouble!" and when the interloper was someone the raven didn't regard as a threat. This time it was the latter, probably just someone else taking a walk. Alexandra sometimes encountered other students outside, usually older ones, and they said nothing to one another and went their separate ways. This time, however, it was two figures making their way directly toward her. She held her wand loosely between her fingers while she tried to make out who the tall, cloaked figures were. She only had to watch them for a moment before she recognized one of them, from the many evenings she had waited for that same figure out in the dark and walked with him across Charmbridge's lawns. Her fingers tightened on her wand.

"Hey there, Alexandra," Torvald said, pulling his hood back to reveal his straw hair and uneven features, now pallid in the chilly breeze. His jaunty tone and his smile weren't quite convincing, but he sounded almost like he had before when greeting her. "Looks like you don't have any dueling partners tonight."

Alexandra's eyes fixed on the other boy behind him. Stuart stood stiffly, with his mouth closed and his eyes in a sort of squint while he avoided looking directly at her.

Charlie descended from the sky and screeched, "Big fat jerk!" before landing on Alexandra's shoulder.

"What do you want?" Alexandra asked.

Torvald came closer. Stuart did not.

"The bird's right," Torvald said. "I was being a jerk."

Alexandra didn't say anything.

"You haven't told anyone else, have you?" he asked. "I mean, about Stuart."

Half a dozen sharp responses came to mind, but Stuart's face - unmoving, wax-like, disturbingly similar to Maximilian's expression when he was keeping things to himself, things Alexandra had only learned about after he'd died - stifled her impulse to lash back. "Just Anna," she said.

Torvald sighed and Stuart grimaced, but Alexandra glared at them, daring them to protest.

"You're a jerk too, you know," she said to Stuart. "Sonja really liked you. You shouldn't have played with her like that."

Stuart shuffled his feet and kicked up little clods of snow and dirt from the ground. "I wasn't playing with her. I didn't want to hurt her. I *tried* to - you know, like her that way."

"From what Sonja says, you tried a lot of things before you broke up with her."

Stuart flushed. "I could have just broken up with her without saying anything. Instead I told one of the most gossipy witches in school the truth. She could ruin me. So could you."

"Like you're the only queer kid in school?" Stuart blanched at her words, and Torvald looked around as if afraid someone might appear out of nowhere to overhear her. Alexandra shook her head. "There are more important secrets than who you want to kiss, and I've got more important things to worry about."

Stuart fell into silence. He had never been as friendly with her as Torvald, especially after the identity of her father became public. This was the longest conversation they'd had since she was in sixth grade.



Torvald stepped closer, speaking to her in a low voice with his back to his friend. "I was hoping... you know, that we could -"

"Get back together?" Alexandra carefully lifted Charlie off her shoulder, and sent the bird flying into the air with a little toss.

"Jerk!" Charlie exclaimed, taking off.

As Stuart turned away, embarrassed, Alexandra grasped the front of Torvald's robes and pulled him toward her. He inclined his head until she could reach his mouth with hers. Both their lips were cold, but warmth passed between them as they kissed. Some of the feelings she'd had before stirred within her, and a part of her could have stood there for quite a while longer kissing. But her affection had cooled since their fight, and so had her desire to get naked with him. Perhaps it had been a brief bit of madness, or perhaps pitting herself against the heavens themselves made earthly urges less compelling. She pulled away from him.

"No," she said. "Sorry."

Torvald's smile was bleak, as if he had expected her answer but was still disappointed.

"Too bad," he said. "But at least you can still perform virgin rituals."

It was almost comforting to hear Torvald make cracks like old times. She smirked at him. "Like you can't?"

He clearly wanted to offer a clever retort to that, but he couldn't seem to find the words.

"Well, bye then." Alexandra turned away.

She walked ten paces before Torvald said, "Hey, Troublesome."

She turned back. "Yeah?"

She jumped as a hex sizzled into the snow where her foot had been an instant ago.

"Watch yourself in the hallways," Stuart said.

"We have to keep you on your toes somehow." Torvald winked, and the two boys walked away.

Alexandra watched the two of them head back inside, then resumed casting spells that sliced, shattered, melted, disintegrated, and transformed pieces of rock and dead wood, all the while thinking about duels she was missing, the lurking presence out there in the woods, and the lingering warmth of Torvald's lips on hers. Above her, the stars came out, and with studied indifference, she walked inside without looking up at them once.

---

Forbearance warned Alexandra gravely that all previous calculations and ritual preparations would become naught on the twenty-second of March, the day she turned fifteen, because of the influence of the Stars Above. Alexandra told her that the Stars Above could fall into the ocean for all she cared, and that she wouldn't be needing any more astrological calculations or rituals.

The day of her birthday arrived. She received an owl bearing a letter from Claudia that morning before breakfast. It was a terse birthday card with a gift certificate for the Larkin Mills Mall. Her sister-who-pretended-to-be-her-mother was back to her usual form, Alexandra thought, except that this time, Claudia's birthday wishes included a line informing Alexandra that she was expected home over spring break, and that she was missed.

Alexandra was not at all reconciled to the idea that she was going home for spring break. Or ever, for that matter.

Her friends threatened to sing 'Happy Birthday' in class, and she threatened to put a Tongue-Tied Curse on all of them. They did get her to promise to come to the recreation room that evening instead of holing up in the library.

Alexandra was expecting to find Dean Grimm outside the cafeteria holding Galenthias, but the Dean was nowhere in sight when she arrived for breakfast. Slightly downcast, Alexandra sat with Anna and Sonja and Carol, and was joined by David and Dylan, but hardly noticed any of them until Anna asked if she was all right.

"You're awfully gloomy," Sonja said. "Did somebody forget your birthday?"

Alexandra was sure her father hadn't forgotten, but she doubted she'd hear from him today. She had decided not to go outside that

evening. She didn't want to risk even a small chance of another confrontation between Abraham Thorn and Diana Grimm here at Charmbridge. She had been hoping Julia might answer her letter by now. She didn't expect any of her other sisters to take notice of her birthday. But by the time she finished breakfast, she knew there was someone she had to see.

"You guys go on to class," she said. "I'll see you in a little bit."

Anna was concerned. "We've only got a few minutes. You'll be late."

"Don't worry." Alexandra waved to her, and turned right out of the cafeteria, heading for the administrative wing.

Miss Marmsley set down her quill when Alexandra approached her portrait. Very respectfully, Alexandra said, "Good morning, Miss Marmsley. May I please see the Dean?"

"Is the Dean expecting you, Miss Quick?" the school secretary asked, as the bell for first period rang.

"Maybe. Just tell her I want to see her, please."

Miss Marmsley did not look pleased. She stepped out from behind her desk and walked out of her portrait frame, leaving only an empty desk and chair pictured on the wall. She returned a few seconds later.

"The Dean says you may return during lunch," she said severely, "assuming that your teacher does not assign you lunch detention, since you will not receive a note excusing your tardiness to first period. Go to class, Miss Quick."

Alexandra went to class, fuming. Mrs. Middle didn't give her detention, but scolded her and took points off her grade for the day. Alexandra remained quiet and moody through Advanced Magical Theory and Charms as well. Anna and the Pritchards watched with concern as she left Mr. Newton's class, telling them she'd catch up to them later.

Back before Miss Marmsley, she said nothing, merely waited in silence as the school secretary made a great show of not noticing her while she finished writing some memos, and then addressed several other students and a couple of teachers who each passed

Alexandra by, coming to the office for various items of business. Finally, Miss Marmsley settled her old painted eyes on Alexandra as if just noticing the girl who had been standing in front of her portrait for the past ten minutes and said, "The Dean will see you now, Miss Quick."

Ms. Grimm was behind her desk, petting Galenthias, who sat in her lap. The black cat regarded Alexandra with minimal interest and no recognition as she closed the door behind her.

"I've been expecting you," said the Dean.

"I came to see you this morning," Alexandra said.

"So Miss Marmsley told me. Naturally, you assumed that I had nothing else to do this morning and it would be perfectly all right for you to cut class and drop by my office."

Alexandra forced herself to ignore the prickle of annoyance provoked by Ms. Grimm's words. "I'm sorry. I should have made an appointment earlier."

"An appointment? I assumed you were here to collect these." The Dean gestured at a stack of thick, heavy books sitting on her desk. Alexandra hadn't paid them any attention until now. There were five of them, leather-bound and gold-gilded, and they didn't look new. There was something foreboding about them. Alexandra knew at a glance that they were magical tomes, and suspected they were the sort of books usually found in the Restricted Reserves.

"What are they?" she asked.

"They arrived for you last night," Ms. Grimm said. "Whoever sent them did not see fit to include his name or return address, but they were contained in a single letter-sized envelope sent by owl post, charmed to defeat magical attempts to look within. Apparently the sender didn't think we would screen your mail, or didn't think highly of our ability to detect sophisticated enchantments."

Alexandra did not let her surprise show, keeping her face as impassive as the Dean's. There could be little doubt who the sender was.

"I had Ms. Shirtliffe and Mr. Grue inspect them thoroughly," the Dean said. "They are free of curses and other Dark magic, but they're very... serious works."

"Serious works?" Alexandra asked.

"Great Works. Famous ones. Hardly light reading. And just barely within the set of permissible subjects for a ninth grader to study independently. Dare I ask why you requested these particular volumes, Miss Quick?"

"I didn't, ma'am," Alexandra said, while wondering how her father had known about her interest in Great Works. Surely Ms. Shirtliffe hadn't told him. "They're, uh, a surprise to me, too."

"I see. A birthday present, then. I will of course have to let Diana know about this. Even if I let you have them, she may wish to confiscate them."

Alexandra scowled, but said nothing.

Ms. Grimm's cold expression didn't change, but her voice was gentler when she spoke again. "So, today you are fifteen." Her fingernails scratched against the top of Galen's head, and the cat closed her eyes and purred, like any other cat. "And now you know why I brought Galenthias to see you every year on the day of your birth. A foolish sentimentality, of course. There was no possibility she would recognize you, or have any idea what day it was."

"Maybe deep down, you hoped she would recognize me."

Ms. Grimm shook her head. "No. Never dream it, Alexandra."

Alexandra approached the Dean's desk until she was standing at the very edge, looking directly across it and down at the black cat in Lilith Grimm's lap.

"I want to see her," she said.

"That's not a very good idea."

"Why? If she won't remember it, it can't hurt her."

"I don't think it's healthy for you to nurture unrealistic hopes."

"You don't know what hopes I'm nurturing or whether or not they're realistic. I think it's easier for you to pretend she's just a cat."

Ms. Grimm opened her mouth, but Alexandra spoke before the Dean could. "Please, Aunt Lilith. I promise I'll only ever ask on my birthdays. But this is what I'm asking for. She's my mother."

Galenthias, oblivious to the tension in the still room, drowsily sat in her sister's lap and flicked her tail. The fire in the hearth was burning low, but the room was pleasantly warm. The deans in the portraits on the wall behind Dean Grimm were all watching them, but none of them so much as exchanged whispers.

Finally, Ms. Grimm rose from her chair, holding the cat in her arms. She walked to the comfortable, cushioned chair that she only offered to important visitors and never to Alexandra, and set Galenthias down in it. Then she took her wand out of her sleeve, and without uttering any words, made a few quick gestures over the head of the cat. In seconds, Galenthias became an adult woman sitting in the chair in the same simple gown she'd worn before, with the same loose, unbrushed hair and confused expression.

"Hello," Hecate Grimm said, looking from Lilith Grimm to Alexandra. "Who are you?"

"Hello, Hecate. I'm your sister, Lilith," Lilith said.

"I'm your daughter, Alexandra," Alexandra said.

Hecate's brow knotted in concern. "I didn't know I had a sister. Or a daughter."

"That's okay." Alexandra sat in the chair next to her.

Hecate smiled at her. It was an unreserved smile, one without hidden barbs or wryness or irony, which were the only smiles Alexandra ever got from Hecate's sisters, but it was also a smile of polite, befuddled geniality. There was no recognition or maternal affection in it. Not that Alexandra knew what maternal affection really looked like.

"Why is your hair white, child?" Hecate asked.

"I tried to cross an Age Line," Alexandra said.

"Oh. You shouldn't do that."

Alexandra smiled. "I want to tell you something."

"What's that?" Hecate asked, still studying Alexandra's white hair.

Next to her, Lilith was almost as still as a statue, but Alexandra sensed her aunt's uneasiness. It was a strange thing to feel Dean Grimm so ill at ease.

"I'm going to restore your memories," Alexandra said, her tone of voice not changing at all. The words got her mother's attention, though. For a moment, Alexandra thought there was something behind those gray eyes, something familiar - it wasn't just glassy confusion - but she couldn't say for certain, and if she'd been pressed, she would have admitted that it was probably just her own desire to see some sign of comprehension, of retention.

"What do you mean, restore my memories?" Hecate asked. "What happened to my memories?"

"You lost them. All of them. And you can't remember anything. Do you remember my name?" Hecate opened her mouth, hesitated as that doubtful crease appeared between her brows again, and Alexandra pressed on without letting her answer: "My name is *Alexandra Quick*, born *Alexandra Octavia Thorn*, and by the Stars Above I am known as *Troublesome*. My father is *Abraham Everard Thorn*, and you're my mother, *Hecate Megaera Grimm*. Today is my fifteenth birthday. Someday, I'm going to tell you all that, and you're going to remember it."

Hecate didn't say anything. For several long moments, she regarded Alexandra with such a thoughtful, serious expression that Alexandra felt hope stir in spite of herself. She had never seen her mother stay silent this long before. Surely something had to be going on inside her head. She looked earnestly into her eyes, willing Hecate to recognize her, remember her.

"You have white hair," Hecate said. "Why is that?"

Alexandra closed her eyes. Hecate asked, "Is something wrong? What's your name, young witch?"

"Good-bye, Hecate," her sister said. Alexandra kept her eyes closed, though she felt the spell and the stir of air as an adult-sized body became a cat-sized one.

"I only allowed you to say those things because she won't remember them, so you can't hurt her with false hopes and promises," Lilith Grimm said. "But what you told her is impossible. I will not let you speak to her again if you cannot accept reality, Alexandra. For your own good."

Alexandra opened her eyes. Her mother was a black cat again, sitting in the comfortable chair licking a paw. Her aunt stood over them both, holding her wand, erect and just a little paler than usual.

"I've already done things that are impossible, Aunt Grimm," Alexandra said. "And I'm going to do more."

Ms. Grimm's eyes were as dark and impenetrable as Hecate's had been, but sharp rather than vacant. "I noticed that little attempt at Naming magic. Did you really think a bit of magic attached to your names would do anything? And what's this 'Troublesome' nonsense? Those silly Ozarker friends of yours?"

"Constance and Forbearance aren't silly."

Ms. Grimm sat back down in her leather chair, leaving Galenthias where she was, and watched Alexandra and Galenthias both from across her desk.

"No, I suppose they aren't," she said. "Ms. Shirtliffe told me you want to begin a Great Work of your own."

"Something like that, ma'am."

"Naming magic, memory alchemy, and now a stack of Great Works, all in addition to your regular classwork. And Merlin knows what else you're up to. You've become quite the academic lately. I wish I did not find your sudden intensity so worrisome."

"I'm just taking my studies seriously, ma'am. It will keep me busy and out of trouble, right?"



Ms. Grimm smiled faintly. "That I doubt." She raised one long finger and pointed it at her. "You want to study like an adult and engage in adult activities. Start behaving like an adult. Fix your hair."

Alexandra raised her wand, and after concentrating a moment, twirled it in a counter-clockwise circle next to her temple and whispered a counterspell. She couldn't see her hair, and she didn't precisely feel anything, but she knew the curse had been undone and her hair was black again.

Ms. Grimm did not look even a little bit surprised.

"How did you know I could undo it?" Alexandra asked.

"You stopped pestering your teachers. You were being stubborn and you liked the attention and the air of defiance it gave you to walk around with cursed hair, but you wouldn't have become so accepting of it if you didn't have the ability to change it." Ms. Grimm steeped her fingers. "A curse from an Age Line cast by a trained Auror is something a senior would find challenging to undo. It's becoming ever more difficult to put limits on your behavior, Miss Quick. I do hope you remember that what you can do and what you should do are two different things, and you are still on probation."

Alexandra noted the shift from 'Alexandra' to 'Miss Quick.' She rose to her feet. "Yes, ma'am."

"You may go." The Dean gestured at the books. "Take these with you."

Alexandra collected the volumes from the Dean's desk, and as she walked to the door, Ms. Grimm said, "Happy birthday, Miss Quick."

Alexandra glanced at Galenthias, who was now stretching, claws extended and sinking into the upholstery of the chair she was standing in, and then looked back at her aunt. "Thank you, ma'am."

Back in her room, she sat down at her desk and began paging through her father's idea of study materials. The Great Works were weighty, and while none of them promised to answer any of her questions directly, they appeared interesting if not particularly accessible. Levy and Dee's *Banishments* talked about ghosts in greater detail than Alexandra had found in any of the open shelves in the Charmbridge library, and Giles Harrow's *Bestiary Diabolic*

described such things as barrow-wights and kelpies and kappas, complete with uncensored descriptions of their grimmer habits. Fausta Sterntochter's refactoring of Ptolemaic astrology as Arithmantic equations made Alexandra think she'd taken the wrong electives. None of these works seemed directly related to predestination or gates between realms, and Alexandra wondered if her father was merely trying to distract her.

When Anna returned to their room, Alexandra showed the books to her. Anna was intrigued by them, but she was obviously trying to hide her instinct to worry and fret over any gift Alexandra received from her father.

Alexandra received an owl that evening from Julia. Unfortunately, it did not contain an invitation to move to Croatoa.

*"I told Mother about the extraordinary and shocking revelations you received," Julia wrote. "You are ever in her heart, as you are in mine. However, while we would both love nothing better than to have you here at Croatoa again, Mother is of the opinion that your idea of leaving your home and moving here is not a very good one. Forgive me, Alexandra, but I agree with her."*

*"Dear sister, I can only imagine how angry you must be at Claudia, but isn't it a little ungenerous to wish for forgiveness from one sister that you are not willing to grant another?"*

*"I would so much like to meet Claudia again, as my sister. Will you not soften your heart to her, Alexandra? And what of Livia? Will you not do what you can so that all of us sisters may be reunited?"*

Julia knew exactly how to tug at Alexandra's heartstrings, and her sister's words filled her with remorse for her selfishness. But guilt did little to erase her resentfulness toward Claudia. She wanted to grant Julia her desire, but she awaited spring break sullenly and without enthusiasm.

## **The Last Pruett**

Grudgingly, Alexandra came to accept that she had no choice about going home, unless she were to run away again, and she thought Dean Grimm really would expel her if she did that. As resentful as she felt about her treatment, about being the 'property' of an older sister with no adult rights, and about a lifetime of lies, she figured she had probably exhausted any special consideration she could expect from her aunt.

She played wizard chess with David on the bus that took some students to Chicago and others home. Anna sat beside her, reading a book. The Pritchards were on the level above, with the Rashes. They had embraced Alexandra before everyone got on the bus, ignoring the Rashes' disapproving glares, and promised they would return from the Ozarks with more "larnin'" from the Grannies.

At least, Alexandra thought, as one of David's knights trampled her bishop, they didn't have to suffer Dylan's presence. He and Carol Queen were sitting in their own booth.

Anna got off in Chicago. She was one of a handful of students deposited at the airport, as she was taking an airplane back to San Francisco. She hugged Alexandra, then gave an embarrassed David a hug as well, and promised to call them. Alexandra and David resumed their chess game when the bus got back on the Automagicka. Alexandra was losing her third game in a row when they reached Detroit and he got off, promising to call her also.

As usual, Alexandra was one of the last students left when the bus exited the Automagicka and drove through the streets of Larkin Mills to stop in front of 207 Sweetmaple Avenue. She walked to the front of the bus with her backpack strapped to her shoulders, Charlie's cage in one hand and Nigel's in the other, with all the enthusiasm of a cat about to be flung into a pond. She looked out and saw the lights on inside her house, but no one outside waiting for her.

"Have a good week, Miss Quick," said Mrs. Speaks.

"Yeah, thanks." Alexandra stepped off the bus.

Mrs. Speaks closed the door and the bus rolled away, leaving Alexandra standing in the street staring at her house. Technically it

wasn't the same house she'd lived in all her life, as it had burned down and been rebuilt three years ago, but it was home.

"Fly, fly," Charlie prompted, eager to be inside and released from the cage.

Alexandra sighed and walked across the lawn and up to the porch. Archie opened the door.

"Is Mom at work?" Alexandra asked. Then, with a pang of irritation, she corrected herself: "I mean, Claudia." Claudia had always at least been home to greet her when she returned from Charmbridge Academy.

Archie's ruddy face was expressionless, and she wondered if Claudia had actually been foolish enough not to tell Archie that her daughter - his stepdaughter - was in fact her sister. Which, she had to remind herself, meant that Archie was not her stepfather but her brother-in-law. She hadn't even gotten in the door and already the thoughts swirling around inside her head threatened to give her a headache.

"Big fat jerk," Charlie said helpfully.

Archie's eyes flickered down to the bird, and he stepped back to let Alexandra in. "She's in the kitchen. She wanted to have dinner ready when you got home."

Alexandra had no idea what to make of this. Claudia rarely cooked. She stepped through the door. Archie put a hand on her shoulder.

"We're glad you're home," he said.

From Archie, this was a significant display of affection. She didn't know what to make of that either.

"Thanks," she mumbled, and hurried past him. Claudia was in the kitchen, which was full of unfamiliar cooking smells. Alexandra stopped and the two of them stared at each other for a long moment, while Archie stood uncomfortably behind Alexandra and Charlie hopped about impatiently in the cage.

"I'd better take Charlie and Nigel upstairs," Alexandra said. Without waiting for Claudia's reaction, she went up to her room, set Nigel on her desk, and let Charlie out.

The raven fluttered about the room, then perched on her bedpost and said, "Miss you terrible."

"Who, them?" Alexandra snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Jerk," Charlie said.

"I'm not being a jerk." Nigel stirred in his cage, and Alexandra proceeded to pour fresh water into the snake's dish and dropped a few crickets into the cage. "I'm arguing with a bird, though. How lame is that?"

"Bird-brain," Charlie said.

She heard Claudia calling her, and she went down to join her sister and brother-in-law for dinner.

---

For the first part of the meal, she said little. All she did was stare at her sister across the table. Claudia asked her about school, and Alexandra gave careful, vague answers. Claudia asked about her friends, and mentioned Anna and David by name. Alexandra told her they were fine. Claudia asked if Charmbridge Academy had disciplined her for running away.

"I'm on probation," Alexandra said.

Archie said, "You got off lightly." Claudia gave him a warning look.

"So," Alexandra said, "just to make sure we're on the same page and we don't have any embarrassing 'oopses' for the rest of the week, you did tell Archie that I'm not really your daughter, right?"

Claudia and Archie both went still. Then Claudia said, "Yes."

"It doesn't change anything," Archie said.

"Really?" Alexandra turned her angry glare on Archie. "I think it changes a lot."

"It doesn't change anything while you're living here," he said.

That was a painful jab, with Ms. King's rejection still fresh in her mind, and Alexandra bristled. But Claudia said quietly, "We're the only parents you've ever had, Alex."

"Only because you kept my real parents from me as long as you could."

"All right, that's enough," Archie said.

"Archie," Claudia said, "I think Alexandra and I will need to have that private talk now."

"Don't leave the table on my account." Alexandra got up.

"Alexandra, sit down now." Claudia didn't raise her voice or betray a hint of anger in her tone or her face, but it was a voice Alexandra had never heard before, and she obeyed in a way she hadn't since she was six years old. She was still sitting there in shock when Archie started to rise.

"You owe Archie an apology," Claudia said. "He shouldn't have to leave like this, but we obviously need to have this out."

"Don't worry about it," Archie said. "I know you two need to have some, er, girl talk."

"Alexandra will be along to apologize to you when we're done."

*Oh really?* Alexandra thought. Her eyes said as much as she and Claudia locked gazes.

After Archie left the room, Alexandra said, "Wow. You almost sound like a daughter of Thorn."

Claudia's face twitched, but it didn't give Alexandra the satisfaction she'd been hoping for.

"What do you want, Alex?" Claudia asked. "I am sorry. I can't undo my mistakes. But you can't hold this over me forever and use it as an excuse to disobey me and do as you please. Legally, I'm still your parent."

Alexandra wondered what would happen if she provided proof that her Confederation Census record had been falsified and that Claudia was not her mother. It wouldn't change anything in the Muggle world, but what would the Confederation do?

"I spoke to our father, after you ran away," Claudia said. "It was the first time in years."

That surprised Alexandra enough to defuse a bit of her anger. "What did he say?"

"He said you're stubborn, hard-headed, and unforgiving."

Alexandra snorted. "He would know."

"Yes. Apparently he does. It seems you speak to him regularly."

"Not exactly regularly."

"But often enough to get to know him. So I guess he can be forgiven, but not me, even though I'm the one who actually took care of you for fifteen years."

"You're the one who kept him from me."

"Really, Alex?" Claudia looked very weary. "Do you really think I could keep Abraham Thorn from doing anything?"

Alexandra fell silent. Her eyes fell to the remains of the pork chops, mashed potatoes, and green beans that Claudia had made for dinner. With her fork, she stabbed a couple of the beans.

"You're stuck with me at least until you turn eighteen," Claudia said. "I can't control what you do then, but you'll always have a home here."

Alexandra put the fork in her mouth. She concentrated on the buttery flavor of the beans.

"Has your life really been so horrible?" Claudia asked.

Alexandra set the fork down. She chewed slowly, then said, "Will you ever tell me the whole truth?"

Claudia's expression went blank. "The whole truth?"

Did Claudia suspect what Alexandra knew already? Alexandra had been planning to ask her about it - to question her about her visit to Roanoke, and her being subjected to the Squib Laws. But something made her hold back.

Claudia might not know why Elias Hucksteen had singled her out - might not even know that Hucksteen had been behind her forced sterilization. Perhaps fourteen-year-old Claudia Quick had known nothing about what was done to her and why. What had it been like? Alexandra had no idea, but it couldn't have been pleasant. It must have been scary.

*Scary enough to fear the wizarding world and hide from it for the rest of her life.*

Anna and David's revelation, Julia's admonition to be more forgiving, and Claudia's own plea all replayed in Alexandra's head, along with an image of wizards grabbing a girl her own age, a girl with no wand and no magic, and dragging her away to do terrible things to her. Throwing accusations in Claudia's face suddenly seemed... cruel.

"I just - I'm just so angry that everyone has lied to me," Alexandra said. "Everyone. Every adult I know has lied to me pretty much my entire life. Except Ms. King."

"And Archie," Claudia said.

Alexandra frowned.

"Archie had a lot of questions, too, when I had to tell him the truth," Claudia said. "You're right, you don't hide something like that and expect there won't be consequences."

Alexandra thought about how subdued and flat Archie had been, very mellow for him. "He didn't threaten to leave you, did he?"

Claudia laughed quietly. "No. Archie has never threatened anything like that. He deserves better than he's gotten - from both of us."

Alexandra chewed that over, struggling with her anger as it was doused with the reality of other people's experiences.

"I'm sorry you had to take care of me," she said. "Your life would have been a lot different if our father hadn't dumped me on you."



You'd have been a doctor. You'd never have had to deal with the wizarding world again. You could have lived in peace."

"Maybe. I won't lie to you now and say it was always easy raising you, especially once it was obvious that you were... magical. But I never blamed you, Alex."

Alexandra looked away. "You've never liked me."

Claudia reeled as if slapped. "Is that what you think?"

"I can't blame you. You have no reason to like the wizarding world. You didn't ask for anything that happened to you, and what our father did to you was pretty shitty -"

"Watch your mouth."

Alexandra paused a moment. "I understand that you did the best you could. But I didn't ask for anything that happened to me either. I didn't even ask to be born. You should have told me the truth as soon as you could, not just waited until everything came crashing down on both of us. That was stupid, and it wasn't fair."

"No, it wasn't," Claudia said.

Alexandra stood up. "May I be excused?" It had been a long time since she'd actually asked to be excused from the table. Claudia didn't answer, and Alexandra headed for her room.

She found Archie blocking the path to the stairs.

"You were listening," she said.

"I have a few things to say to you," he said. "Claudia has had a really hard time - harder than you know. I know she kept things from you. She kept things from me, too. That's between Claudia and me. What she kept from you is between Claudia and you. But I want you to know that from the moment I met her, Claudia has protected you as much as any mother could. She would never have married me if she wasn't convinced that I'd protect you, too."

"I didn't need protection."

"Now you're just being stupid, Alex. You were a little girl. You're still a little girl, just an older, mouthier one."

"I can take care of myself."

"Of course you can. Just like every other fifteen-year-old."

Alexandra had been snapping back with little thought. Feeling aggrieved and defensive and more than a little confused, she hadn't really thought over Claudia or Archie's words. Before she could offer another retort, though, something Claudia had said made her pause, and then some of what Archie had said sunk in. He hadn't ever been overly affectionate, he was frequently irritable and rarely understanding, and she was mostly annoyed and embarrassed by him. She'd never thought of him as her father, but - how fair was that? For most of her life, her real father hadn't been around. Archie had. And it was true: in Larkin Mills, she had lived in a little bubble of safety, however imaginary it might have been, and no matter what trouble she got in, Archie had never tried to make her fear him.

"You know," she said, "Claudia is right. You never lied to me. You're almost the only one who didn't." She looked away. "Maybe you do deserve better."

Archie showed no reaction to this. He didn't say anything else as she went upstairs to her room and threw herself on her bed to ponder things she suddenly did not have the vocabulary to describe.

---

Alexandra, Archie, and Claudia continued to float on the surface of a sea with deep and dangerous currents, all of them ignoring the effort it took to navigate it. Alexandra had not quite forgiven Claudia, but now she had the uneasy feeling that maybe Claudia wasn't the only one who'd done wrong.

Her sister and brother-in-law resumed work the next day, though with overlapping shifts. Archie did not object when Alexandra said she was going to walk around the neighborhood, though he told her, "Stay away from Old Larkin Pond. Understand?"

"Yes, Archie."

She wasn't planning to go to Old Larkin Pond. Instead, she walked a few houses down the street, and then, with considerable trepidation, knocked on the door to Brian's house.

Nobody answered, and their family SUV was not in the driveway. She considered calling him but decided not to. Wherever they were, they'd be back, and she'd probably see him around the neighborhood. Maybe he'd even come knock on her door. He knew by now that she came home for spring break. Restless and not ready to go home yet, Alexandra found her steps carrying her toward downtown, and the corner on which sat the old Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse.

It hadn't changed since the winter. There were the same number of broken windows, no more, no less. Drivers and pedestrians still went past without giving the place a second glance. The fence around it still warned away trespassers. There were now plants growing in the cracks in the cement around it, but it was otherwise as barren a property as before.

Alexandra was thinking about what Martha had told her, that even the Trace Office wouldn't know she was in the warehouse.

She looked with her witch's sight, and the Muggle-Repelling Charm fell away like old paint dissolved in turpentine. She walked through the nonexistent fence and directly to the front door. The door opened with a push.

Up in the sky, Charlie circled the building and cawed.

*I don't think I'll need you this time, Charlie*, she thought, but the presence of her familiar was almost as reassuring as the wand in her pocket.

The ground floor was as she remembered it, mostly empty and dusty, with more sunlight coming through the windows than in December. She walked around looking for any suspicious boxes or packages or crates. If there had been any recent 'deliveries,' Martha must have already moved them upstairs.

She walked to the stairs. "Hello?" she called. "Martha?" She cast a Light Spell and opened the door to the stairwell, then ascended the stairs quietly, listening and keeping her wand ready. At the entrance to the second floor, she paused. Goody Pruett's portrait was located here, but this was also the warren of dark corridors and unlit offices where Martha stored the Dark Convention's illicit items. She proceeded up to the third floor and turned right to enter the large, sunlit open space that occupied half the upper floor.

She turned to face the dark corridors penetrating into the other half of the warehouse, and visualizing the old chair she had seen in one of the offices on her last visit, said, "*Accio chair!*"

With a clatter and a bang, the chair came bouncing off a corridor wall and flew across the floor to her, its feet scraping dust from the worn wood. Alexandra grabbed the back of it and placed the chair so she could sit in it facing the direction from which it had come. It was just a bare wooden chair, an old one, and when she sat down and put her weight on it she could feel it wobble a bit. But with her arms resting on those of the chair, wand in one hand, she imagined herself a queen on her throne. She looked to the right at the closed windows and pointed her wand at the nearest one. With a flourish, she unlocked the window and popped it open. The window made a painful creak as it swung outward, letting in fresh spring air and street sounds. A moment later, Charlie was flapping at the window, and then darting through the gap. Without being told, the raven beat wings over to her and landed on her shoulder.

Now she felt like a queen. She sat in her chair with a raven on her shoulder and a wand in her hand, and waited.

With a shuffling sound, Martha emerged from the same corridor from which the chair had come flying. The hag took small, careful steps. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and she was stooped over a little more than usual. Her red eyes were fixed on Alexandra's wand as she stepped into the light.

"Hello, dear," the hag said. "It's so wonderful to see you again."

"I'm sure." Idly, Alexandra twirled her wand. It held Martha's attention. "So, anything new to tell me? Anything interesting happen since December?"

"No, nothing at all," Martha said. "Business as usual, so to speak." She was palpably nervous, though she spoke in a calm, conversational tone.

"No trespassers?"

"Trespassers? Certainly not."

"Have you been here the whole time? Don't you ever leave?"

Martha blinked, laying a hand alongside her face to shield her eyes from the sunlight. "Just the occasional - harmless - walk. Very late at night. I'm due to be replaced soon, though. One of my sisters will take my place here."

It was run just like a business, Alexandra thought. She was going to have to learn more about that, but she asked sharply, "When you go on walks, what do you do if you encounter Muggles?"

Martha snorted, which made a horrible sound in that huge nose of hers. "Muggles only see what they want to see, dear. They don't look at a hunchbacked old lady too closely."

"If I ever find out you've harmed anyone, I will make you wish you'd never set foot in Larkin Mills," Alexandra said, as she stopped twirling her wand.

Martha sounded affronted. "I told you, dear, we don't sh -"

"Where you live. Right." Alexandra tossed her head, and Charlie made a low croaking sound that caused the hag to back away. "I'm going to be using this place to practice magic. Just this third floor area here. You'll leave it alone, you won't intrude on me, and you won't spy on me. Leave me be and I'll leave you be."

Martha stood there a moment as if unsure what response was desired from her, then she simply said, "Yes, dear, of course. Old Martha won't be any bother to you."

"Good." Alexandra flicked her wand, and flames shot from its tip. Martha almost fell over backward. "You can go now."

Martha backed away. Alexandra caught the way the hag's ingratiating smile fell away just before she disappeared into the shadows.

"She's scared of me, Charlie," she whispered, "but we'd better keep an eye out."

"Wicked!" Charlie said.

Alexandra rose from her chair, feeling almost as regal as she had sounded. The Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse was now, to all intents and purposes, her domain. She intimidated

hags with a few words. She had a refuge here in downtown Larkin Mills invisible to Muggles and the Trace Office alike. No more spending every vacation unable to do magic. This was what being a witch should be like all the time, she thought.

---

Alexandra visited the warehouse almost every day the week of her vacation. She told Claudia and Archie she was going to the mall or the library, and sometimes she did actually go to the latter place, but after her first afternoon throwing all sorts of charms and transfigurations beneath the roof of Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections and not receiving any Howlers or notices from the Trace office, she exulted in her freedom to unleash magic at will.

Martha stuck her head into the open space Alexandra had turned into her practice studio once, and quickly withdrew. Alexandra didn't see her again. The floor was scarred, scored, and burnt and there were fragments of concrete and wood splinters everywhere. Alexandra had discovered that she could easily levitate cinder blocks and 2x4s from the lot below up into the warehouse. She used them for target practice. When she was tired of throwing hexes, she practiced transformations and even some elementary attempts at conjuring inanimate objects. Teachers at Charmbridge could conjure desks, chairs, and even doors at will, but that was something not taught until Advanced Charms I. So far, Alexandra had not even succeeded in conjuring a pencil.

She had, however, done a pretty good job of transforming that bare wooden chair. It was now gilded and cushioned with a higher back, and it had carved lions' feet. The lions' feet actually looked a bit more like dog paws - and a squashed, maimed dog at that - but skill at Transfiguration did not necessarily come with equivalent artistry.

Alexandra had yet to see the Seaburys' SUV in the driveway, and the house remained unlit in the evenings. Brian's family had apparently gone on vacation. Claudia told her that Bonnie still went to physical therapy twice a week, but she was expected to recover completely. The Seaburys had told Claudia nothing about their vacation plans.

Anna and David both called her. Alexandra told them about the warehouse with some excitement, not mentioning the resident hag. Now David was the envious one: his father might be able to arrange

for him to practice on his broom while he was at home, but he couldn't use his wand. When Anna mentioned schoolwork and her Citizenship Project, Alexandra remembered that she still needed to complete hers, and thought maybe she should talk to Martha about hags' rights.

On Friday afternoon, Alexandra walked to the warehouse on Third Street with Nigel tucked under her shirt. Charlie was flying around the neighborhood, no longer feeling obligated to watch over her while she went to the warehouse, but Alexandra wanted to see if she could perform any magic using her snake familiar.

She passed through the park and saw Billy Boggleston and his friends at the same table as before, smoking and making a lot of noise. The noise increased when they saw Alexandra.

Nigel stirred beneath her shirt, agitated by the tension he felt from her. She put a hand over her belly, where the snake was coiled comfortably between her tank top undershirt and t-shirt, and murmured, "Don't worry, Nigel. I've got no reason to bother with them."

Fortunately, Billy didn't seem to feel there was a reason to bother with her either. The boys did not leave their seats, only shouted after her with catcalls and jeers. Alexandra made sure she was out of their sight, and not being watched by anyone else, before she crossed the street to the Regal Royalty warehouse and walked through the fence.

Her experiments with Nigel were mostly fruitless. She let the snake slither across the bare floor of her practice area and tried to command him, tried to feel what he felt, tried to see through the snake's eyes, and tried to direct where he might go, but Nigel, after investigating the immediate surroundings, decided the most suitable course of action was to crawl through a crack in the wall out of Alexandra's reach. Pleas, commands, and fingers thrust into the crack after the snake were all fruitless, and Alexandra feared she might have to start blasting walls apart, until she hit upon the more expedient solution and said, "*Accio Nigel.*"

The snake came shooting back out of the crack in the wall, writhing and agitated. When Alexandra scooped Nigel up, he actually hissed and bared fangs at her.

"Chill out, Nigel," she said. "You're the one who decided to crawl into a hole." *And I let him*, she reminded herself. She couldn't blame the snake for acting like a snake.

She pulled up the bottom of her shirt and tucked her familiar back beneath it, pressing a hand against the snake to keep him still.

"Hey, Martha?" she called out.

There was no answer, even after Alexandra walked into the dark corridors with her wand lit and shouted down them.

Nigel continued squirming as she walked downstairs. She listened for any sounds, and continued to call Martha's name on the second and first floor, but decided not to venture into the darkness while she had an agitated snake under her shirt.

Maybe the hag was ignoring her, or maybe Martha had already left and her replacement had not yet arrived. Alexandra would have to come back the next day and find out.

"Bye Martha," she called out as she left, not expecting an answer and not getting one.

When she returned to Sweetmaple Avenue, she saw two vehicles that hadn't been there when she'd left a few hours earlier. One was the Seaburys' SUV in their driveway, and the other was a shiny BMW sitting in front of her own house. The latter vehicle was of more interest and concern to her, so she walked past Brian's house without knocking on the door and up the steps to her own.

Inside, she found Claudia sitting in the living room with Livia.

"Hi," Alexandra said, as her two oldest sisters both looked at her. She was covered with dust and a little sweat. Nigel began squirming again, forcing her to clap her hand to her stomach.

"Hello, Alexandra," Livia said. She was wearing a plain blouse and slacks, not her doctor's uniform, but her demeanor was still reserved and professional, as if she were in her office and not in her sister's living room.

"We were waiting for you before we ate dinner," Claudia said. "Archie is on duty until midnight."



"What's wrong with your stomach?" Livia asked.

Alexandra pulled Nigel out from under her shirt - the snake was refusing to be still.

Livia's eyebrows went up. "You have a familiar?"

Alexandra didn't answer. Claudia said, "Put your snake back in its cage and wash up, Alex. I'm afraid dinner is what I picked up at Marmalade on the way home. I'll go set it out on the table." She rose from the couch and walked into the kitchen. Livia's eyes followed her with a slight frown.

"She gets pretty touchy when you talk about anything magical," Alexandra said.

"I know."

"So, you're here to visit Claudia?"

"Partly." Livia turned her attention back to Alexandra. "I also came to do something about what you told me about."

"What's that?"

"My family's property here in town."

Alexandra grimaced. "Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections? What are you planning to do?"

"Evict any hags or other creatures living there."

Alexandra stood there in dismay, with Nigel coiling about her wrist.

"Claudia and I have both been hiding from the wizarding world for years," Livia said. "We've both been neglectful of certain responsibilities because of it. It's time for me to do something about that."

"Livia? Alexandra?" Claudia called from the kitchen.

"I need to put Nigel back in his cage." Alexandra hurried upstairs, deposited the snake in his terrarium, and opened the window so that Charlie could enter her bedroom when it pleased the raven to return.

Downstairs, the three sisters ate take-out food while Claudia asked Alexandra what she did at the mall all day, and Alexandra wondered if Claudia really believed she'd been at the mall. Livia asked Claudia questions about Larkin Mills Hospital and her current workload, and the two of them talked about medicine while Alexandra wanted to shout at them both.

"So how is Charmbridge Academy?" Livia asked suddenly. "Is Mr. Cervantes still teaching Charms?"

"He's an Assistant Dean," Alexandra said. "Claudia doesn't like talking about my school."

"It's all right, Alex. I told you before that it's okay," Claudia said.

Alexandra and Livia made small talk about magic and Charmbridge Academy. Claudia was as silent as Alexandra had been when they were talking about nursing and medicine.

When they were done eating, Livia said, "I'd like to pick up Alexandra tomorrow morning to go visit... the warehouse. If that's all right with you, Alexandra?"

"Yeah, sure." Alexandra had a lot of questions for Livia, but didn't think they were good ones to ask in front of Claudia, even if their oldest sister was becoming more tolerant of talk about magic.

Claudia nodded. She began cleaning up the residue of dinner. Alexandra got up to help her. Then they walked with Livia to the door, and Livia and Claudia stood apart for a moment, the ghostly traces of a bond that had once existed between them heavy in the air. They leaned into one another and exchanged restrained hugs.

Alexandra wondered if there were some things you never got over.

---

Livia rang the doorbell early the next morning. Alexandra had already eaten breakfast. Archie was still asleep and Claudia was at work, so Alexandra didn't need to say good-bye to anyone before she walked out to Livia's car and got in. It was much newer and more expensive than Claudia's car, and Alexandra liked the comfortable seats and plush interior so much, she almost wished they were driving more than a few blocks.

"So, you want to evict the Dark Convention from one of their warehouses," Alexandra said. "What are you going to do if Martha says no?"

"Martha?"

"The hag who's guarding the warehouse."

"You're on a first-name basis with her?"

"I don't actually know if hags have last names."

"Martha will have to recognize that I am the Pruett heir."

"How? Did you even bring a wand?"

Livia had started the car. She paused as she was about to pull away from the curb, reached between the two buttons directly below her collarbone, and slid a long wand out from beneath her blouse.

"I thought you're supposed to be Wandless," Alexandra said. "And - seriously, that's where you keep your wand?"

"It doesn't exactly fit in my pocket." Livia slid the wand back down the front of her blouse. Now Alexandra knew why Livia sat so rigidly upright. "I will let you accompany me, Alexandra, but I want you to stay behind me and let me handle things if this Martha is uncooperative."

"You're going to handle things? Have you ever 'handled' a hag before? How long has it been since you've actually used a wand? I mean, other than for healing?"

Livia pursed her lips. "I got Superior scores in Basic Magical Defense on every one of my SPAWNs."

"How many years ago was that?"

"I've probably forgotten more magic than you've learned, Alexandra. I'm an adult, fully-trained witch and you're a ninth grader. I'm in charge - understand?"

"Sure." Alexandra fingered her own wand in her pocket and called for Charlie, who might still be sleeping back in the cage sitting in her

bedroom, or who might have already flown out the window to do whatever ravens did all day over Larkin Mills.

It took them only two minutes to drive to the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse. Livia frowned at the fenced-off property. "The closest parking is that gas station across the street."

"No, you can just go through the fence."

"What do you mean, go through the fence?"

"Look at it with your witch-sight," Alexandra said.

"My witch-sight?" Livia sounded as if she had never heard of such a thing before.

"The. Fence. Is. Not. Real. It's a Muggle-Repelling Charm. A fully-trained witch should be able to see through it."

Disbelievingly, Livia looked from Alexandra to the fence, which stretched across the worn, cracked drive that had once allowed wizardly trucks and wizardly cars and other wizardly vehicles to pull up to the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse with deliveries, or to pick up sweets to be delivered to Goody Pruetts across the Confederation.

"If you don't believe me and you can't make yourself go through a simple Glamour, how are you going to handle a hag?" Alexandra asked.

Livia pressed her lips together, took a deep breath, and muttered, "If you're pranking me, I swear I will make you pay for the repairs to my car." She closed her eyes and stepped on the accelerator. The car shot forward and the chain link fence with all the dire warning signs seemed to stretch, as if the illusion itself felt the pressure of the solid vehicle against it, and then they were through, sitting in front of the warehouse. Behind them, the illusory fence still stood, showing no sign that a car had just passed through it. Livia opened her eyes, then turned off the ignition.

"It was an illusion," she said, bemused. "The fence was an illusion." She gave the warehouse another look. "Those windows aren't really broken. And that door -"

"How are you at Unlocking Charms?" Alexandra asked.

Livia bit her lip. "I learned a few in tenth grade."

"No problem, then. I'll let you handle this."

Livia kept swiveling her head around furtively as she tried to open the heavy metal door. Alexandra leaned against the brick wall while cars drove past, the people inside not giving them a second glance. She let her sister try to open the door for several minutes before she grew bored and impatient.

"Can I try?" she asked.

Livia dropped her hand to her side, staring at the locked door in frustration. "How did you get in?"

Alexandra cast an Unlocking Charm. The door clicked and swung open. She shrugged as Livia stared at her.

Livia pushed past her to lead the way into the warehouse. Alexandra followed closely at her heels.

"Seriously, maybe you should let me do the talking," Alexandra said. "Martha knows me."

"You can introduce us." Livia was looking around as they stood on the ground floor. "It's so much different than I remember," she murmured.

"It's been abandoned for years," Alexandra said.

"I can see that." Livia walked to the stairs, and Alexandra followed, rolling her eyes.

"Martha lives on the third floor," Alexandra said.

They walked up to the third floor. Livia spent some time looking around Alexandra's 'studio,' while Alexandra said nothing about the scorch marks and shattered beams of wood and bits of concrete and glass sprayed around the open area. Livia cocked her head and squinted at the throne-like chair.

"Martha!" Alexandra called. "Martha, come here! I want to talk to you."

Livia turned to her. "That's a little rude, don't you think?"

"You kind of have to cop an attitude with hags," Alexandra said, "or they'll try to eat you."

Livia stared at her blankly for a moment, then laughed. "You have quite a twisted sense of humor, Alexandra."

"Didn't your parents ever tell you about hags?" Alexandra said.

She regretted the words immediately as her sister's face turned grim. But Livia said, "I heard rumors about them, of course, and occasionally saw them in the Goblin Market. But they don't really -?"

Alexandra shouted again: "Martha! The daughters of Thorn demand your presence!"

"What?" Livia exclaimed.

"It helps to be a little bit dramatic, too," Alexandra said. "When she shows up, be... you know. Kind of bitchy. If they aren't scared of you, they won't respect you."

Livia's face turned several shades of appalled and incredulous before settling on resolute. "I told you to let me handle this."

Martha did not appear. Alexandra frowned. "She mentioned she goes for walks sometimes, but not in the morning. Maybe she's asleep." She shouted again, this time using a spell to amplify her voice until it rattled the windows and made the floor shiver: "MARTHA!"

There was still no sign of the hag.

"Maybe she's hiding in her lair," Alexandra said.

"Lair?" Livia frowned. "Why don't you take me to see the portrait of Goody Pruett you told me about?"

"That's on the second floor." Alexandra was becoming a little uneasy. Could Martha be lying in wait, tired of being pushed around by a teenage girl? Perhaps she had been planning to do something, but when Alexandra arrived with another witch, the hag had thought better of it and was now lying low. But with her wand ready to curse

hags or other creatures, she led the way downstairs, not letting Livia get ahead of her this time.

On the second floor, she cast a Light Spell, and was relieved to see Livia do the same. *At least she remembers that much.*

"Martha?" Alexandra projected her voice in a theatrical manner. "Where are you? We want to talk to you. My sister is with me, and if we have to come looking for you, you will risk our displeasure!"

Livia made a sputtering sound. "Risk our - are you serious? Who talks like that?"

"Your displeasure? Your displeasure?" called a voice from down the hallway. "Trapped in eternal darkness listening to horrible, unspeakable sounds in the night - that is displeasure! Watching my family's hard-earned fortune deteriorate in this crumbling ruin of a once-thriving empire -"

"That's Goody Pruett," Alexandra said.

They walked down the dark hallway, Alexandra watching the shadows and listening for any sounds besides the old woman's ranting, until the portrait was revealed in the glow of their wands.

Goody Pruett put a hand up in front of her eyes. "You're blinding me! Let me see, oh, let me see!"

Alexandra and Livia lowered their wands. The light now illuminated their faces from below, making them as eerie and sinister as the grim old witch painted in blacks and whites. But Goody Pruett recognized Alexandra. "You! The young witch who consorts with hags!"

"I told you I'd come back," Alexandra said.

"Hello, Goody Pruett," Livia said softly. "Do you remember me?"

Goody Pruett's eyes, perpetually captured in brown pigment, were disturbingly bright in that withered face. Her voice lost much of its stridency. "Livia?"

"I'm sorry you've been left hanging here," Livia said. "I just didn't think about this place, after my grandparents died."

Alexandra did not know if magical portraits could cry. But Goody Pruett's face was trembling in the fashion of someone who wanted to cry. "Your grandparents - dead? Then, my descendants -"

"I'm the last Pruett," Livia said. "I'm sorry."

Goody Pruett bowed her head. Then she straightened her shoulders, lifted her head, and looked Livia in the eye. She spoke with quiet dignity, and only a hint of pleading. "Please, take me with you. Let me reside in the home of the last of my heirs, not here."

"I'm sorry," Livia said, "I can't."

The painted face became stiff, as if she were drying into immobility.

"My husband is a Muggle," Livia said. "We live in a Muggle neighborhood. My house is a Muggle house."

"Muggles," the old witch whispered. "The Puetts have been untainted by Muggle blood since we first came to the New World -"

Livia cut her off. "I don't intend to leave you hanging here alone in the dark. I'm here to reclaim my legacy. I'm going to banish any hags and other Dark creatures and do something with this property. I don't know what yet, but I'll either renovate it into something you're satisfied with, or find somewhere else you'll be happier - on one condition."

"Condition? What condition?" Goody Pruett's voice became sharp again.

"My friends are Muggles, my husband is a Muggle, and the child we're going to have will have Muggle blood no less pure than his Pruett blood. I don't know if a portrait can change its thinking, but if you can't, you can at least keep your mouth shut. If I ever hear you speak ill of Muggles or Squibs again, I will *end* you. Do you understand?"

A portrait might not be able to cry or change its thinking, but it could turn pale - color actually leached out of Goody Pruett's faded cheeks. Her mouth opened slightly, her eyes widened in astonishment, and then, abruptly, she clapped her lips together and gave Livia a curt nod.



"Good." Livia glanced sideways at Alexandra, who was staring at her older sister in astonishment. "Now, we're trying to find the hag who lives here. Martha? Do you know where she went?"

The portrait didn't answer right away. Her eyes closed. Alexandra wondered if she was going to sleep. Then she mumbled, with trembling lips, "Those sounds... those sounds..."

"What sounds?" Livia asked.

"Last night." Goody Pruett opened her eyes again. "There was screaming."

"Screaming?" Alexandra and Livia said together.

"Then there was silence. And then, there was... skittering."

"Skittering?" Alexandra and Livia both repeated, while Alexandra felt a chill as if the shadows were reaching for them as they spoke.

"Skittering... something skittering, skittering, up the stairs, down the stairs, down the corridors..." Goody Pruett's eyes became wide, and she put her hands over her ears. "Skittering!"

Alexandra's scalp prickled all over, and she grabbed Livia by the arm. "We're getting out of here."

Livia turned to her. "What?"

"We've got to get out, now. We're in danger."

"Excuse me?"

Alexandra began dragging her sister toward the stairs. Goody Pruett wailed: "Don't leave me here!"

"Alexandra, let go of me. What's going on?" Livia shook her hand off and stopped.

"There's something in here more dangerous than a hag." Alexandra held her breath, listening. Had that been the sound of dry, bony fingers scratching on wood? Her spine tingled and there were goosebumps all over her flesh.

"What thing?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do want to know."

"Standing here in the dark waiting for it to jump out at us?"

Livia opened her mouth, then her eyes darted around as something scraped against the floor nearby.

"Come on," Alexandra said, more urgently. This time Livia didn't argue.

They were almost to the exit, and Alexandra was letting Livia precede her out the door, when she paused.

"What is it?" Livia asked, holding the door open for her.

"Nothing." Alexandra joined Livia outside, and did not say anything about the long, dark smear on the floor, a rusty red color that wasn't quite dry.

## The Injun-Blooded Warlock

From the front seat of Livia's car, Alexandra stared at the door of the warehouse as if a hideous, stunted, baby-like creature might come bursting through it and rush out at them. She was still gripping her wand. Livia inserted her key into the ignition and started the engine, but then took a deep breath and instead of putting the car into motion, demanded, "What was that all about?"

"Drive!" Alexandra said. "Now! What are you waiting for?"

"Stop telling me what to do." Perhaps realizing that this did not exactly make her sound authoritative, Livia moderated her tone. "You need to stop shouting orders at me, Alexandra. I'm not a hag." She squinted at the warehouse.

"Please," Alexandra said, "I'll explain everything, but let's get out of here."

Livia frowned, then put the car into reverse. "What was in the warehouse?"

"It's an undead... thing. It was created by Indian witchcraft, and it's evil."

"How do you know about this?"

"It stalked me all the way from Din~~o~~tah. It followed me to Charmbridge, and now here."

Livia took another long breath. "Then we have to get rid of it."

The car passed through the illusory fence around the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse, and Alexandra finally took her eyes off the metal door and looked at her sister. Livia was shocked and pale. If Alexandra hadn't heard her dressing down Goody Pruett a moment ago, she wouldn't have believed this polished, professional woman belonged in the wizarding world at all.

"Do you know how to get rid of an animated baby mummy?" Alexandra asked.

"I've never heard of such a creature."

"Then leave it alone. It's after me. I'm the one who has to get rid of it."

"You? Alexandra, you're just a teenager. This is something for trained wizards to deal with."

"Well, good luck with that. What are you going to do, call the Department of Magical Wildlife? Or the Auror Authority? You're not even a citizen of the Confederation anymore, are you?"

"No, I was taken off the Census when I became Wandless. But..." Livia sighed.

"But what?"

Livia shook her head as they backed onto the street. "I will do something about this. I want you to promise that you won't go back into that building."

"Only if you promise the same."

"What?"

"You can't handle what's in there any better than I can," Alexandra said, thinking, Not even. "I won't promise not to go back unless you do, too."

"Alexandra, stop being so stubborn."

"Not likely."

Livia took a deep breath, obviously vexed. "All right. Until I've had someone deal with whatever is in there, I won't return either. But stop talking about dealing with Dark creatures yourself. You need to let adults take care of dangers like that."

"Adults." Alexandra snorted. "Adults don't do anything."

Livia fell into a troubled silence at this. Neither of them spoke again until they were heading back to Sweetmaple Avenue. Then Alexandra said, "So, you're married."

"Yes," Livia said.

"The child you told Goody Pruett about - you meant you're actually going to have a child, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"So, I'm going to be an auntie?"

Livia's lips curved into a small, involuntary smile. "Yes, you're going to be an auntie."

"You said 'he.'" Livia didn't look pregnant, and Alexandra couldn't guess how far along she was. "How do you know it's a boy?"

"I'm a witch. With or without a wand, I'm still a witch." Livia pursed her lips, then glanced at Alexandra. "They do still teach these things at Charmbridge, don't they?"

"What things? Sex education? No, they don't have classes like that at Charmbridge, but I know everything."

Livia laughed. "Everything? Really."

Alexandra turned her face away to look out the passenger side window. "I mean, Claudia is a nurse, she made sure I knew all about biology and stuff."

"What about magic?"

Alexandra might have been able to talk about this with Julia, but she wasn't nearly so comfortable with Livia. "I know some things. But they don't teach anything about sex and pregnancy in class."

"Hmph. When I went to school, it was passed on by word of mouth, older students to younger ones. And there were always some teachers who would take younger witches aside. I assume boys got similar knowledge, but I never asked. They really should have classes, like Muggles do."

"No one ever took me aside. Maybe it's a pureblood thing." Of course, Alexandra had always adopted a rather superior attitude

toward other girls, whom she assumed knew less than she did. Until Sonja had passed along the charms and potions she knew.

As they turned onto Sweetmaple Avenue, Livia said, much more seriously, "Most half-blood children are magical. In fact, contrary to popular belief, they're no more likely to be Squibs than so-called purebloods."

Alexandra considered that. "So your son will probably be a wizard."

"Yes." Livia slowed to a stop in front of Alexandra's house. They sat there in silence. Finally, Livia said, "I kept putting it off - even though I wanted a child as much as my husband. He knows about magic, but only a little, just enough to believe that it's real. There's a lot I haven't told him about the wizarding world - things I'll have to tell him, now."

"Because once you have a child, you'll have to deal with the wizarding world again," Alexandra said.

"Yes. In a way, it was meeting you and seeing Claudia again, and realizing what it's cost her to hide from the wizarding world, and what she did to you, that made me realize it was time for me to face the decision I'd been putting off myself. I'm not going to make the mistakes Claudia made."

"She had her reasons."

"Really? I'm surprised to hear you defending her. When I talked to her she seemed convinced that you're a long way from forgiving her."

Uncomfortably, Alexandra remembered Julia's admonition again. "I haven't, completely. But I don't blame her for wanting to hide from the wizarding world."

"She had no right to hide the wizarding world from you."

"Where do you get off pretending to be concerned about me? If you cared, why didn't you ever drive down from Milwaukee to set her straight? Oh, that's right, you were hiding from the wizarding world yourself."

Livia was taken aback by Alexandra's sudden anger. "That's different."

"Yeah, it's different - you're a witch. You had a choice. Claudia was abandoned by her family - your family - and kicked out of the wizarding world just because she couldn't do magic. You stayed. You have no idea what happened to her afterward."

"What do you mean?"

Alexandra shook her head. "Never mind. Just, it was pretty hard for her."

"Well, if you feel that way, maybe you should be more forgiving of her."

"Maybe." Alexandra got out of the car. "But you've got no right to judge either of us."

"Good-bye, Alexandra." Livia winced as Alexandra slammed the car door and went inside.

---

The monster wasn't going away. It had tracked her to Charmbridge Academy and then followed her to Larkin Mills. Alexandra wasn't sure why it hadn't attacked her in the warehouse. Perhaps it liked to confront its victims alone. She doubted it cared about wizarding secrecy, though. So she wasn't safe in her house. Neither were Claudia and Archie. She thought about running away again, but she didn't know where to go. She could try telling Ms. Grimm again, but the Dean hadn't really listened to her last time.

She walked around her house that evening, pacing the front yard, the side lots, the backyard, pondering what sort of wards she could create. They'd learned a few in Mr. Newton's class, but Alexandra had never actually tested her ability to create a barrier against Dark creatures, especially Dark creatures of unknown enchantment. She had no idea if she could cast a spell that would actually Bar this thing. And of course, if she tried the Trace Office would know, and

casting spells at home while on probation would probably be an expelling offense.

The clouds overhead were sparse; there was no sign of weather that might conceal her use of magic.

If I get expelled for protecting my home, then that's what I'll have to do, she thought. She continued circling her house, lost in thought and aggravated at what seemed to be an insoluble dilemma, while Charlie sat on the roof observing.

On her fourth circuit around the house, she felt something, and stopped to identify it. It was not a smell or a sound or anything that sent tingles or shivers through her. It was not visible, but there was something there, something like when she had known her wand was beneath the ice at Old Larkin Pond, like when she had felt the extent of the wards at Charmbridge Academy, like when her father had urged her to see with her witch's sight.

There was magic around the house on Sweetmaple Avenue. It was as subtle as a whisper at the limit of her hearing or a tiny speck at the edge of her vision. And, she realized, she had never noticed it before because she had always felt it. It was like suddenly realizing that your home has always had a peculiar odor.

Alexandra went from walking in circles to pacing back and forth on her driveway. What kind of spell was on her house, and who had put it there?

Charlie cawed, and Alexandra saw Brian approaching from his house. He came to the end of her driveway and stopped.

"Hi," he said. "What are you doing?"

She wondered if he'd been watching as she walked in circles around her house. It must have seemed odd to him, though all the neighbors were used to odd behavior from her by now. She shrugged.

Brian waited, as if hoping for more of a response than that, then said, "We just got back from Florida yesterday."

"Florida?"



"We went to Disney World. Bonnie's always wanted to go."

"How is Bonnie?"

"Really good." Brian leaned against the fence separating Alexandra's driveway from the neighbor's yard. "The doctors say her recovery is like magic."

Alexandra only nodded.

"I'd have brought her to say hi, but Mom and Dad are kind of weird about letting her out of the house." His face had a peculiar, unhappy cast, and he looked down. "They decided on this Florida trip kind of suddenly, after my mother talked to your mother at the hospital and she mentioned you were coming home this week on vacation."

Charlie took off, drawing Brian's attention for a moment.

"They can't exactly order me to stay away from you," he said, "but if I tell my mom I'm going to go talk to you, she gets this pinched look and doesn't say anything."

Alexandra shrugged. "We both know your mother never did like me much. Anyway, I'm going back to school tomorrow, so she can stop worrying."

"Until summer vacation starts."

Alexandra checked Charlie's location - still flying around over their block, but the raven wasn't giving any warning cries. The sun was still just above the horizon. She suspected her monstrous nemesis, if it was here in Larkin Mills, wouldn't just come skittering down the street in broad daylight. It might not care about the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, but it had crossed several Territories without being detected, so it was obviously a stealthy creature.

"So do you think your parents will take you to Hawaii over the summer?" she asked.

Brian laughed. "I doubt it." He moved closer to her and lowered his voice. "I just wanted to say, I know what you did."

"I didn't do much, Brian. I told you, I don't know the kind of magic that could heal Bonnie."

"But you brought that other doctor who did something, and you used some kind of magic. I don't know exactly what, but -"

"We really shouldn't talk about this. Just pretend it never happened. I'm glad Bonnie is doing well, and I'm happy if I helped somehow, but you were right not to want to hang out with me, and you were right not to want to have anything to do with magic. Magic isn't real. It's better if we keep things that way."

Brian frowned. "You said - you wished you could talk to someone."

"Not you." To avoid his hurt expression, she focused her gaze down the street, where the sun now hovered on the horizon and she could almost imagine a horrid baby mummy with a demonic head clattering toward her, unseen in the sunset glare until it was far too close. "Brian, you said you were afraid when you found out that magic was real. You're worried about Bonnie being in danger. Your parents may not know why they're afraid of me, but they're not wrong. Magic is dangerous. There are bad things out there. You were all right, all along. Hanging around with me is dangerous. I can't even tell you all the things that could endanger you. You're in danger just by knowing as much as you do."

Brian didn't say anything, and when his silence stretched on, she forced herself to look at him again. His expression was no longer hurt. It was thoughtful, a little puzzled, but not afraid. The lack of fear annoyed her. Why did he treat her like a pariah for four years and then refuse to be frightened when he should be?

"What about your parents?" he asked. "Are they in danger?"

"Yes," Alexandra whispered.

"Can't you tell anyone? Do you have magic cops?"

"Tried. We shouldn't be talking about this, Brian."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Wait until tomorrow. I'll go back to school, and everyone here will be safe."

"Until this summer," he said.

Alexandra surveyed the street again.

"You kind of gave me this speech over Christmas," Brian said. "I don't blame you for thinking I'm going to freak out and shun you again, after the way I treated you. If you really don't want to be friends anymore, I'll leave you alone. But you can stop trying to scare me away."

Alexandra closed her eyes. "I don't - I don't know."

She wasn't quite sure how Brian wound up with his arms around her, or she with her head leaning against his shoulder. It felt good. Brian wasn't as tall as Torvald, and not as thin and bony. There was something familiar and comfortable about him, though in all their years of friendship, they had never so much as hugged one another.

She wasn't sure how long they stood like that, but they were interrupted when Archie pulled into the driveway and honked at them. They pulled apart as Archie's truck rolled past. He got out, still wearing his police uniform, eyebrows raised in bemusement. "Hello, Brian."

"Hello, Mr. Green," Brian said.

"Claudia will be home tonight," Archie said to Alexandra. "We'll both be seeing you off tomorrow."

"Kay." Alexandra kept her eyes averted from her brother-in-law.

"You want to invite Brian for dinner?" he asked.

Brian said quickly, "Thanks, but I can't - my parents expect me back home in a few minutes."

"Oh. Well, okay - see you later then, Brian." The two teens stood outside in embarrassed silence while Archie went inside.

"My parents really would throw a fit if I ate over here," Brian said. "Especially my mom."

"I figured." Alexandra glanced down the street at the Seabury residence. Like most of the houses on Sweetmaple Avenue, light shined out of its windows as the sun fell further behind the horizon. Alexandra saw someone moving inside. Perhaps Brian's mother, cooking dinner at this moment, was checking out the window to see what her son was up to.

"She'd probably throw a fit if she saw me do this, too," Alexandra said. She placed her hands on either side of Brian's face and pressed her lips to his.

He didn't startle or back away. Brian was neither as bold nor as practiced as Torvald, but he returned Alexandra's kiss while she held it, and held it, making sure that Mrs. Seabury would have plenty of time to glance out her kitchen window and down the street.

Charlie's wings flapped overhead. Brian made sounds like he needed to breathe, and Alexandra separated from him, first her lips, then her embrace. He looked a little dazed.

"Pretty bird," Charlie said from the eaves of the porch, followed by a mocking cackling sound.

"Your pet raven is one weird bird," Brian said.

"Wicked clever," Charlie said.

"Tell Bonnie I said hi," Alexandra said.

"Okay." Brian nodded.

"See you in a couple of months - if your family doesn't go to Hawaii over the summer." Alexandra turned and walked inside, snapping her fingers at Charlie to indicate that the raven should wait at her bedroom window.

To her great relief, Archie didn't say anything, though the corners of his mouth remained turned up in amusement until that evening, when Claudia came home.

Claudia asked her how she felt about going back to Charmbridge Academy. Alexandra assured her that she wanted to, very much. Claudia was concerned about the dangers, and about Alexandra being happy there. Alexandra understood that her sister didn't just mean Charmbridge Academy, but the wizarding world.

In a softer tone than she had used with Claudia in months, Alexandra said, "The wizarding world is where I belong."

Claudia studied the surface of the table between them.

"But I don't want to leave this world behind," Alexandra said.

Her sister looked up to meet her eyes again.

"You said I'd always have a home here," Alexandra said quietly. "Is that still true?"

"Yes," Claudia said. "Always."

Alexandra nodded. "As long as I do, I'll always come back."

-----

Alexandra didn't sleep all night.

After Claudia and Archie went to bed, Alexandra sent Charlie outside again. The raven protested, but Alexandra said earnestly, "Watch the house. Watch the house, Charlie. Tell me if anything is coming."

And she sat up, sometimes sitting at the top of the stairs and just listening intently, sometimes walking around quietly downstairs, looking out windows, checking the front and back and side doors, then going back upstairs to check her bedroom window and the guest bedroom window, and listening. She wished she could brew coffee, but Archie and Claudia would smell it.

It was a long, boring night. After the first time she nodded off, Alexandra went back to her room to fetch Nigel, and carried the

snake looped around her wrist or coiled around her neck. She didn't really think her reptile familiar would sense anything she couldn't, let alone warn her, but the feel of Nigel's scales against her skin helped keep her awake. The snake seemed to have picked up on her agitation, and moved continuously while she held it.

Her heart pounded in her chest at every sound from outside, though the only thing she ever heard for certain was wind and passing cars. Now and then her imagination conjured up other sounds - dry, leathery feet scraping across the concrete path up to the front door, or something skittering along the side of the house, or little bony fingers scratching at a window, trying to pry it open.

She didn't know what to do if the monster did come to her house other than try to fight it, and pray she could distract it long enough for Claudia and Archie to get out. Maybe the use of magic would bring Aurors or Special Inquisitors to Sweetmaple Avenue, though she feared she was not being watched quite that closely. As the witching hour passed, and then three a.m., four a.m., and on toward dawn, Alexandra became more and more tired and her imagination more prone to hearing things in the dark. She started in a panic several times, and slapped, pinched, or poked herself awake once more, then fished Nigel out of her shirtfront or her sleeve or her hair.

By dawn, she was a wiry bundle of underslept nerves. When she let Charlie in at sunrise, the bird was too tired even to croak imprecations at her, just settled into the cage for a long bird-nap. She put Nigel in his cage too, and the snake coiled into a ball and flicked his tongue warily.

Alexandra stayed awake, not certain that the coming of dawn meant that the danger was past.

When Archie and Claudia got up, Alexandra pretended she had just gotten up herself. Reluctantly, she took a shower, still keeping her wand always within arm's length, listening for any unusual sounds. When she went downstairs, she stared longingly at the coffee Archie had made for himself and Claudia. She merely mumbled in response to most of what her sister and brother-in-law said. When Claudia asked if she were all right, Alexandra did her best to feign alertness and said she was just anxious about her final months of being a freshman.

When it was finally time to go, she hauled Charlie and Nigel's cages and her magical backpack downstairs. Before they went outside to wait for the Charmbridge bus, she and Claudia faced each other.

"I am sorry," Claudia said. "For everything."

Alexandra swallowed. "I know - I know it was hard for you. And unfair. And taking care of a sister you never wanted - that's our father's fault."

Claudia seemed to be struggling with something. "It's true that I never asked to have an infant dropped in my lap like that. Yes, it was hard. But you are my sister, Alexandra." She glanced down at Charlie and Nigel, and smiled. "My baby sister."

"Do you want to meet our other sisters?"

Claudia hesitated. "Yes," she said, very quietly, "I think maybe I would."

"Julia really wants to see you again, now that she knows you're our sister. Maybe this summer?"

"Maybe."

They heard a vehicle come to a halt on the street in front of their house. Claudia reached her arms out and pulled Alexandra into a hug.

"Be good, Alex," she said. "And be careful."

"Sure," Alexandra said.

Archie and Claudia walked with her down the walk to the curb, and Archie gave her a much briefer hug and the same admonishment to be good.

"Bye, Archie," Alexandra said, and she got on the Charmbridge bus.

None of her friends were on the bus yet, so she curled up on an empty seat and fell asleep.

---

She only woke up as the bus was climbing the hill toward the Invisible Bridge. Anna was seated next to her, watching her with great concern. Alexandra sat up and rubbed her eyes as Charlie squawked.

"We thought about waking you up," said David from across the table, "but you looked so peaceful and quiet."

"David wanted to turn your hair into bird feathers," Anna said. "I wouldn't let him."

"Thanks." Alexandra sat up and only realized when she looked out the window that they had reached their destination.

"Are you sick?" Anna asked.

"No. I just didn't get much sleep last night."

As everyone got off the bus and lined up to file across the Invisible Bridge, they saw Ms. Shirtliffe and Ms. Fletcher standing on the far side, and Miss Gambola with several JROC seniors hovering in the air on brooms.

"Is it my imagination, or are they a little more alert than usual?" Alexandra asked.

"Maybe Ms. Grimm decided to take your safety more seriously," Anna said.

"My safety?"

"You're the one who's been attacked twice on the bridge in four years."

"Maybe they're just worried about everyone else on the bridge with you," David said.

"Sure you want to cross with me?" Alexandra asked.



In answer, Anna slid her arm through Alexandra's and smiled. David grunted and walked alongside her. Despite being dull with lack of sleep, Alexandra was cheered by their presence, and by Constance and Forbearance, who caught up to them after leaving behind the Rashes whom they had sat with on the bus.

"We'uns 've got news," Constance said.

"But we best wait 'til we'uns can gather 'neath the willows," Forbearance said.

"I hope it can wait until after I take a nap," Alexandra said with a yawn.

She did take a nap upon returning to her room. Anna woke her when it was time for dinner, and then the 'Alexandra Committee' met in the library to catch up and share what they had done over vacation.

Everyone listened in horror while Alexandra told them about her monstrous nemesis.

David was the most skeptical. "This thing - it's the size of a baby, and it took down a hag?"

"It's created with Dark magic. It's practically indestructible. I hit it with everything I had, including lightning bolts, then trapped it in an inferno. And it still got away."

"Have you actually seen it since then?" David asked.

"No - but I've felt it."

She tried, without much success, to explain what she sensed when she walked in the woods around Charmbridge Academy, feeling the wards that protected the school.

"I've never 'felt' magic," David said. "Have you guys?"

Anna shook her head. The Pritchards exchanged a look and said nothing.

"Have you tried?" Alexandra asked. "Okay, look, I know maybe this sounds like wizarding mumbo-jumbo, but we thought astrology was like that, too."

"I still think astrology is like that," David said.

"Now hush," Constance said, while Forbearance's lower lip turned out.

"I believe you," Anna said to Alexandra.

David grumbled. "I'm not saying I don't believe you, I'm just saying it's not like you've never gotten the wrong idea before and jumped to conclusions. You do have kind of an imagination."

"Except when I turn out to be right," Alexandra said flatly. "If this undead thing isn't after me, what happened to Martha?"

"Maybe she took off. Witches are poking around in her 'secret' hideout, threatening her. I'd look for somewhere else to hide, too."

"And the blood?"

"Maybe she decided to have a snack before she left."

Anna put her hands to her mouth, while Alexandra glared at David, whose expression was deadpan.

"David Washington, that is a horrible suggestion," Constance said. Forbearance shuddered.

"Well, if it's all my imagination then there's nothing to worry about." Alexandra yawned. Even after her nap, she was tired.

"Anyway, you're safe here at Charmbridge," Anna said.

Safe for now, Alexandra thought. Was the creature even now running with its peculiar, hobbled gait through woods and marshes, crawling through culverts and underpasses, skulking in bushes, making its way north from Larkin Mills back to Charmbridge Academy, magically drawn to her with the tirelessness of an undead thing?

Maybe her imagination was running away with her. David was right, there were other explanations.

But her intuition told her that she was being hunted, and that she would only be safe when her nemesis was destroyed. Until then, she could not return home.

"We'uns hain't shared our news yet," Constance said.

"We'uns spoke to the Grannies again whilst we was home," Forbearance said.

Alexandra groaned. "I hope you're not going to suggest another ritual."

"No, Alex," the twins said together, and Forbearance said, "The Grannies wants to meet you."

"What?"

"We'uns told 'em 'bout your conclavin' with the Stars Above," Constance said.

"An' they'uns wants to hear it themselves," Forbearance said.

"From me? But I told you everything. I can't tell them anything you didn't. Why would the Grannies care about me? And I thought Ozarker stuff was all secret. Now they're going to invite a 'foreigner' to learn Ozarker lore?"

"We'uns don't know that they'uns is gonna reveal secrets to you," Constance said.

"So they just want to talk to the girl named Troublesome who talked to Heavenly Powers?"

"They want to know for sure you is Named Troublesome."

David sighed. "That Naming stuff again."

Alexandra listened to the Pritchards argue with Anna and David, who were debating the significance of Ozarker legends, then said, "Are your Grannies going to help me? Did they have any ideas

about me getting out of my bargain with the Generous Ones? Or avoiding the doom pronounced on me by the Stars Above?"

Everyone fell silent.

"You think you could send them an owl and ask if they know how to get rid of an undead baby mummy?" Alexandra asked.

Constance said hesitantly, "We'uns might could." The prospect seemed to daunt her and her sister.

"Great. If they can do that, I'll fly a broom to the Ozarks if I have to."

"I thought foreigners aren't welcome in your hollers," David said.

"It's different if'n you're invited," Constance said.

"An' this year is the Jubilee," Forbearance said.

"Jubilee years is the one time when allus invited to the Ozarks."

"It's a grand celebration."

"It'll carry on all summer an' inter fall."

"Sounds like fun," Alexandra said dryly. "So all I have to do is get rid of a Dark creature that can't be killed, and get permission from my sister to visit another magical Territory."

She wondered how much Claudia knew about the reclusive Ozarkers and their antipathy for Muggles. How she was supposed to finagle such a visit was no more clear to her than how she would get rid of her nemesis.

-----

With only a couple of months left before the school year ended, most students were beginning to worry about their finals and end-of-the-year SPAWNs. Alexandra resumed reading everything she could in the library and from the books her father had given her.

Bran and Poe had never heard of animated Indian baby mummies, but banishments were part of several Great Works, and soon she was reading about the various ways that spirits were bound to the living world and how certain Dark creatures were created. There were no instructions for actually performing such Dark Arts, but in a book with the rather sinister title *Walking in Darkness* that was actually the memoir of an Auror named Alastair Van Harkwood, Alexandra was delighted to find a comprehensive description of the Expecto Patronum spell that Henry Tsotsie and the other Indian Aurors had performed back at Witches' Rock.

'The wizard must bring vividly to mind his most cherished, happiest memory,' Van Harkwood wrote, before describing in verbose, meandering fashion his proudest moment as an Auror, which Alexandra skipped past to find the rest of the spell description. Van Harkwood also claimed to be the only wizard who had self-taught himself the Expecto Patronum spell: 'It is extraordinarily difficult for those less talented than myself, and I have never known another man who did not require a mentor before the first silver tracery of his Patronus could be seen.' Van Harkwood never mentioned witches.

Alexandra was excited at the prospect of casting a Patronus of her own. She told her friends, and for a few days, Anna, David, and Sonja joined her in the evening on the lawn outside Charmbridge, all of them waving their wands and crying, "Expecto Patronum!" They invited Constance and Forbearance, but the twins were once again mollifying the Rashes by spending evenings in the library or in a common study area with their 'bespoken' beaus.

After practicing nightly for over a week, no one had produced even a glimmer of silver light. Sonja and David stopped practicing the Expecto Patronum spell and began dueling each other, gently and without using flashy spells that would illuminate the night. Alexandra watched jealously and kibitzed.

Sometimes Innocence and William sneaked out to join them. Like Alexandra, they wanted to learn spells ahead of their grade level, and she obliged them. She had become a tutor of sorts. She saw William's improvement in JROC drills, and so did Colonel Shirtliffe, who bluntly asked Alexandra one afternoon, "Are you teaching dueling spells to Killmond and other students?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Alexandra said. "Is that against the rules? We're not dueling."

"There's a fine line between practicing dueling spells and dueling," Shirliffe said.

"We're not dueling," Alexandra repeated.

"And are you actually learning anything?" the teacher asked.

"I hope so," Alexandra said.

"Stay out of trouble until the end of the year," Ms. Shirliffe said, "and I'll teach you to cast a Patronus properly."

Alexandra was unable to hide her surprise, and the teacher laughed.

"You think all the adults around here are idiots, don't you, Quick?" With a curt gesture, Shirliffe dismissed her, and Alexandra saluted and left, feeling chagrined and wondering how she could tell when she was being watched and when she wasn't.

It was the beginning of May when Constance and Forbearance came to her one evening in the library and told her, "We'uns got an owl from our Great-Granny."

"Oh," Alexandra said, without looking up from her book. "That's nice."

"It was about you," Constance said.

Alexandra paid more attention. "And? Did she have any advice?"

"She 'membered us 'bout an old Ozarker legend," Constance said.

"Oh," Alexandra said, less enthusiastically.

"It's 'bout Brother Randolph an' how he slipped his Nemesis, which was set on him by an Injun-blooded warlock," Forbearance said.

"Uh huh." Alexandra maintained a polite expression as the twins proceeded to tell her the tale.

Brother Randolph apparently played a trick on the 'Injun-blooded warlock,' stealing his heart and his feathered cloak, and in retaliation, the warlock created a monster out of blood and corpse powder and sticks and animal hides, which he sent to pursue Brother Randolph across all the Lands Above.

"It wouldn't never stop pursuin' him," Constance said.

"On account 'o it had his Name," Forbearance said.

"So how did Brother Randolph escape?" Alexandra asked.

"He went back to the Injun-blooded warlock," said Constance, "an' told him that he was tired of runnin'. He pled mercy an' he returned the warlock's heart an' his feathered cloak."

Forbearance continued: "The Injun-blooded warlock laughed at Brother Randolph an' thanked him for his heart an' his feathered cloak back, but told him that even if'n he wished it, he couldn't save him."

"That Nemesis would pursue him to the ends of the earth an' even to the Lands Below."

"So Brother Randolph bowed his head an' said he best just accept his fate, an' he slunk away."

"And?" Alexandra was impatient, but the Pritchards were obviously enjoying telling the tale.

"Well, it turned out that Brother Randolph switched hearts," Constance said.

"He kept the Injun-blooded warlock's heart an' give him his own," Forbearance said.

"With his Name writ on it."

"So the Nemesis found the warlock."

"An' that was the end of him."

"Course, now Brother Randolph had the heart of a dead man."

"But that's another tale."

The Pritchards' voices both trailed away. They shifted restlessly while Alexandra waited for the moral. Then she said, "Is your great-grandmother saying I need to switch hearts with John Manuelito?"

The twins shook their heads.

"Brother Randolph's tales is mostly parables," Forbearance said.

"I think the point is, you gots to fool this thing someway," Constance said.

"I reckon Great-Granny Pritchard's meanin' is that you oughter use trickery 'stead o' tryin' to fight it."

"Thanks. That's very helpful," Alexandra said.

She waited until Constance and Forbearance went away, then buried her head in her hands. She was like that when Anna found her.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked, setting her books on the table very gently.

Alexandra sat up. "It's really hard sometimes, Anna."

Even though Anna didn't know what, specifically, Alexandra was talking about, she nodded and sat down next to her.

"I have... all these problems, not just stupid teenager problems, but life-and-death problems," Alexandra said. "If adults even believe me, they give me stupid advice I don't understand. Like I'm supposed to just figure everything out all by myself."

"But you're not all by yourself," Anna said. "You have us."

"I know, Anna." Alexandra took a deep breath. "I have been trying to keep my promise. I haven't been hiding things from you."



"I know." Anna smiled. "But you don't tell us what you're going to do until after you do it, and you only ask for help after you decide you can't do something on your own."

"Because most of the time you'd either want to stop me or join me."

"And you can't allow either," Anna said.

Alexandra sighed. She didn't want to argue. Then something came into her eyes. Anna saw it, and asked, "What?"

"I just had an idea," Alexandra said.

Anna waited.

"You'll want to stop me or join me," Alexandra said, "and I can't allow either."

Anna bit her lip, then slowly straightened in her chair.

"Tell me your idea," she said. "I'll do whatever you tell me to do, I promise."

## Gift

Alexandra began walking in the woods each evening, practicing spells but also using her witch-senses and waiting for the return of her nemesis.

She was just within the perimeter of Charmbridge's magical wards the first time she felt something watching her. She stared through the trees into the dense tangle of forest undergrowth. Insect and bird noises filled the woods night and day now that spring was in full bloom, but she thought she heard something rustle in the bushes. It could have been anything, but she felt icy prickles on the back of her neck, and she knew.

"You're back, aren't you, you little monster?"

She stepped closer to the invisible line that separated the safety of Charmbridge's grounds from the dark lure of the forest beyond, and held a hand out, wondering if the thing was eager with anticipation, if it was ready to spring - if it even had such feelings. Or if it was just watching and waiting with cold, deathly calm.

She could feel the magic of the wards. It was not precisely a physical sensation, but if she had to describe it, she would say it was like hot knife blades pressing against her skin, almost but not quite hard enough to cut her.

It was a very strong spell, and she didn't think she could dispel it even if she wanted to. It wouldn't be very good protection, after all, if a teenager could knock it down. But she thought she could reach through it, like slipping a hand carefully through a barrier of blades...

She drew her wand suddenly and set the bushes in front of her ablaze. She sent green spears of light and yellow bolts of lightning flashing through the trees, hurled rocks and bark and needles through the air, made the ground ripple, and uprooted bushes. In the smoke that lingered in front of her for minutes after her onslaught, there was silence. She had not seen anything scurrying across the ground. Nothing had fled from her magical assault.

*You want me to believe you're not there,* she thought.

She heard some older students who'd been out on the lawn coming her way, shouting excitedly after seeing the lightning and smoke, and she hastily snuffed the small fires she'd ignited and walked back toward the school. The upperclassmen slowed to a halt when they saw her emerging from the woods. She recognized a JROC senior, and he greeted her. None of the others said a thing to her, but they whispered to each other as she passed them by.

Alexandra continued her evening walks through the weeks of May. She didn't encourage her friends to come with her now, and as finals were approaching, most of them were preoccupied with studying. Alexandra spent most of her time studying too. Indeed, JROC and these evening excursions were the only times she wasn't in class or in the library, except to eat and sleep.

Sometimes, she took Nigel or Charlie with her, thinking that maybe her familiars might help her Patronus materialize. Nigel preferred coiling up in her pants pocket or the sleeve of her robe, but sometime she set the snake on the ground and tried to feel what he was feeling, taste the air the way he did, or make him slither in the direction she willed him to.

One evening she was engaged in doing this when she heard a pop and spun around with her wand out. Larry stood there with his usual amused, disdainful expression.

"I heard now you're setting the woods on fire," he said. "Why can't you swallow tinctures or wand your skin like other mentally disturbed witches, instead of turning into a pyromaniac?"

She made a crude suggestion about what he could do with himself instead of bothering her.

He just smirked. "Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

The crack about her mother provoked her despite her determination not to let Larry get to her. Her wand sparked in her hand. Startled at the fury in her expression, Larry raised his own wand in defense. Then his eyes widened and he exclaimed, "Merlin!"

"What?" Alexandra barely had time to wonder what he meant when something huge and scaly shot past her with a hiss. Larry Apparated away.

Alexandra gasped. "Nigel?"

The enormous serpentine head turned in her direction, and a forked tongue flicked out and whipped the air in front of her face. The giant snake's cold, reptilian eyes met hers. She saw no familiarity or warmth there, and she became aware that at the moment, she was a conveniently-sized snack for her enlarged familiar.

Nigel hissed again, a loud, blood-chilling sound, and then shrank, and shrank, and shrank, until in seconds, he was back to his normal size.

Alexandra heard another pop. Larry had returned. He was breathing hard, trying to look resolute. His determination melted into confusion. "Where did the giant snake go?"

Alexandra leaned over and picked Nigel up. Larry stared at the little brown snake dangling from her hand. "What the hell - an Engorgement Charm?"

"Something like that." She hadn't spontaneously performed magic like this in a long time. She showed teeth in a smug grin. "Are you afraid of snakes?"

"No!" he snarled, then muttered something under his breath.

"Why did you come back?" she asked.

"If you were going to get eaten by a snake, I wanted to watch." With a look of disgust, Larry Apparated away once more.

"I wonder if you could just swallow a baby mummy," Alexandra said. Nigel's tongue flicked out, tasting the air, and she tucked the snake back into her sleeve.

---

The deep river valley that cut between the two ridges spread out in glorious shimmering green and silver before Alexandra. Green trees and bushes, a silver thread of river winding its way north to south, twisting like a giant snake. She didn't know where it started or ended, only that it marked the divide between the Muggle world and the wizarding one, and that freshmen were forbidden to fly this far from school.

She could feel the protections surrounding Charmbridge Academy slide away behind her. Charmbridge's grounds covered a large area, but the wards didn't extend all the way to the valley and the Invisible Bridge that crossed it.

She had checked her broom out of its locker. Ms. Shirtliffe would let her do that to practice broom drills. Alexandra had drilled for an hour, joined by William and a few of the younger JROC wands. William didn't ask questions, he just did it because she asked him to. The new wands did it because she and William told them to, and they were awed and terrified by Alexandra. Hazing of younger wands by older ones was practically a JROC tradition.

Now she was skipping lunch and hovering high in the air. Opposite her was the mountain with the Muggle highway cut around it. After checking for cars on the road and other Charmbridge students in sight and seeing only Charlie gliding overhead, Alexandra dropped, fast, to the valley floor.

Charlie dived after her, cawing, but Alexandra laughed, seized with a sudden impulse to see how close she could come to the ground without crashing into it. She plummeted far faster than was safe - Ms. Shirtliffe would take away her flying privileges and possibly bust her back a rank again if she saw her flying so recklessly - but as the ground rushed up at her, she felt no fear or concern. She braked the broom hard enough to make her insides squeeze together, and the hard, short bristles at the end of her Twister actually brushed dirt as she tilted it back, while her feet dangled inches from the ground. Charlie screamed at her.

Alexandra grinned at the raven, then floated along the base of the cliff on the Charmbridge side of the river. It was mostly reddish rock and relatively even, so when she found a rougher seam of red and white rocks jumbled together, she recognized what had once been an entrance to one of the tunnels leading into the cavern complex beneath Charmbridge Academy - the level below the sub-basements. Once, she had followed this very tunnel to the chamber where the gateway to the Lands Below was located.

As Dean Grimm had promised, the tunnel was sealed now.

Outside the protection of Charmbridge's wards, Alexandra sat on her broom and waited. After half an hour, she floated slowly back up to the top of the cliff and flew back and forth, eying bushes and small

trees that grew along its edge. John Manuelito must have hidden there while summoning the murder of crows that attacked her in September. Somewhere in there, even now, her 'Nemesis' might be trailing her, though she could not feel anything watching her. She had half-hoped it would leap off the cliff to come after her, but apparently it would not be so easily lured into the open.

Alexandra continued flying around the valley, and even performed some aerobatic tricks, until she saw flashes of color below, accompanied by laughter carried on the wind. More students, older students, coming to picnic in the valley or perhaps find a make-out spot. Alexandra took a circular route back toward the school, keeping a long, green row of pine trees between herself and the other fliers

Her first reconnaissance had been successful. She hadn't just been looking for confirmation that the valley tunnel was sealed, but testing how closely she was watched, and whether even a brief excursion beyond the safety of Charmbridge's wards would draw an attack from the creature. Anna had not liked the idea, not at all, but she liked Alexandra's next step even less.

"I'm not saying I don't believe you," Anna said nervously, while brushing her hair that night. "But David did have a point. You keep saying you can feel it, but you haven't seen it once."

Alexandra was lying on her back on her bed, hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling and trying to rouse Nigel with her thoughts. The snake remained complacently coiled around its magical warming rock. The crease of concentration between her eyebrows vanished, only to be replaced with a frown as she turned her head to regard Anna, who was sitting on her own bed in a nightgown. One of Anna's bare legs hung over the edge of her bed while the other was tucked beneath her. After brushing her hair, she was tying it up in preparation for sleep.

"So you don't not believe me, you just think maybe I'm imagining the whole thing," Alexandra said.

Once, that would have been enough to make Anna look down, bite her lip, and either apologize or let the matter drop. Now, however, Anna finished pinning her hair and then put her hands in her lap. "I hate the idea of you risking getting in trouble for nothing. And this is big trouble you're risking."

"Which is worse: me getting in trouble again for breaking school rules, or an unstoppable undead monster hunting me wherever I go and possibly eating someone else?"

Anna blanched. "If you told Ms. Grimm what you're up to -"

"She'd say: 'I assure you, Miss Quick, you are perfectly safe so long as you stay within the boundaries of Charmbridge's protective wards, and do not fly off on solitary adventures.'"

Alexandra's deadpan imitation of the Dean was quite good. Anna put a hand to her mouth to cover a giggle in spite of herself, and then her face turned serious again. "But if she believes there's something after you, you could have some of the teachers help you trap it."

"I've told her there's something after me!" Alexandra's impatience did make Anna look down now. "Anna, you know adults never believe anything until it's too late. Isn't that obvious by now?"

Anna bit her lip.

"Anyway, I promise, I'm not going to try to fight it if it does appear. It can't fly and it can't cross the protective circle. I'll be on my broom, so all I have to do is fly past it back onto Charmbridge's grounds. And if it does appear when I'm on my broom, then I can shoot off some fireworks with my wand until someone shows up. Maybe with more witnesses, they'll believe me."

Anna nodded unhappily. Alexandra thought her plan was reasonable, but it was the final execution she had in mind that really worried Anna.

---

Alexandra didn't just take Charlie with her the next time she flew into the valley. She brought Nigel as well, tucked beneath her uniform jacket. It was a drizzly afternoon following JROC drill, and Alexandra was riding one of the school brooms this time, so she could not engage in the sort of maneuvers that were possible on her Twister. She flew gently, with Nigel squirming beneath her buttoned shirtfront.

She descended to settle on the ground in front of the sealed tunnel entrance and stepped off the broom. Charlie was circling the cliff

high above. Alexandra might not be able to communicate her precise instructions to her other familiar, but Charlie knew what she wanted the raven to watch out for. She believed so, anyway.

She held her wand pointed in a straight line at the rocks in front of her, aligned with the dark tunnel beyond as she remembered it.

"*Defodio!*" she said, and a small chunk of rock was blasted free.

After several repetitions of the spell, there was a conical hollowed-out space carved into the rock, and Alexandra began trying to refine her technique, shaping and honing the pieces of rock gouged out by her spell. She wanted to drill a long, narrow hole, not try to blast away the rocks entirely, which would require an entirely different spell and a great deal more effort.

It took the better part of two hours before she heard the crunch of something giving way and saw a dark hole at the end of seven or eight feet of excavation. When she leaned into it, she felt cold air on her face.

*I thought so.* She pulled Nigel out. She waved her wand over the snake and said, "*Luminos.*" Nigel immediately began glowing.

"Don't worry, it won't hurt you," Alexandra told the snake. She had tested the spell first on inanimate objects, then on insects, then on frogs, and finally on herself. She planned to demonstrate it during her SPAWN. She knew she wasn't the first to invent a Glow Charm, but considering how few students ever invented any new spells, she thought it should be worth an extra mark or two. Not nearly as much as the magic she couldn't demonstrate for her SPAWN...

The glowing snake slithered down the passage she had drilled through the rock and reached the black hole at the far end.

"Go on, Nigel," she whispered encouragingly.

The snake disappeared. Alexandra thrust her wand into the bore-hole and cast an Amplification Charm on Nigel. The little dark hole became a brilliant pinpoint of light.

*Two for two,* she thought. She hadn't been sure her charm would work when she couldn't actually see Nigel. But he was her familiar, and apparently that sufficed.



She had, however, misjudged the effect of observing a very bright light shining inside an enclosed space through a small hole. When she tried to use one of the magical lenses she had borrowed from David, first she saw spots before her eyes, and then only a bright light as if the sun were shining inside that dark tunnel. When she cast *Finite Incantatem* to end the Amplification Charm, she saw only a dark hole again.

She sighed and put away the lens, thrust her wand into the bore-hole, and wiggled it to Levitate Nigel back up to the other end. It took some coaxing, and some unintended bumping of the snake repeatedly against the rocks, before Nigel came crawling back down the hole toward her. When the brown snake finally slithered into her hands once more, he was agitated and hissing.

She tried to comfort the snake, but Nigel was not like Charlie and did not respond to soft words or cuddling. All she could do was promise not to experiment with her familiars anymore. Anyway, she had proven what she wanted to: they had 'sealed' the tunnel by collapsing only the entrance.

She picked up small rocks and shoved them into the hole she'd drilled, then used hexes to blast them deeper and wedge them harder, until she had mostly concealed the evidence of her excavation.

After that, she returned to her room and waited for Anna. After fifteen minutes, Anna entered and shrugged off her outer robe, and only then suppressed a shiver, as if she'd been holding it in.

"Did it go all right?" Alexandra asked.

"He didn't try to abduct me again," Anna said.

Alexandra smiled. "Mr. Journey is a ghost. He can't do anything to you."

"I know that." Anna stood there, eyes fixed nowhere in particular. Alexandra waited. Finally Anna turned to her. "I'm pretty sure he didn't suspect I was distracting him. He spent a lot of time trying to justify himself and not-quite-begging for my forgiveness."

"Thank you, Anna." Alexandra took her friend's hands. "I know being alone in the basement with Mr. Journey had to be scary."

"I'm more scared of what Dean Grimm will do to me if she figures out I was occupying Mr. Journey while you were out of bounds trying to get into the tunnels. Did you, by the way?"

"I didn't actually get in, but I proved it's possible. I broke the seal on the tunnel I know about. Mr. Journey never acted like anything was up? No elves came and told him something was going on?"

Anna shook her head. "So I guess that means you're going to proceed with your insane plan."

"Do you really think it's insane?"

It was an honest question, and Anna knew it, from the way she bit her lip and paused before answering. "I think it's dangerous. And I remember what happened the last time I helped you do 'recon'."

"It is dangerous, Anna. So is going home to Larkin Mills with a nemesis-thing stalking me."

"Let me tell the others. If we all teamed up -"

"No." Alexandra's voice was curt and final. It sounded too much like her father's, and had a similar effect: Anna swallowed her objections and looked down. Alexandra softened her tone. "It's one thing to help me do magic. Putting yourselves in danger is totally different. You didn't fight that thing. Nobody is going to face it but me." Alexandra squeezed Anna's hands. "I'm going to plan everything very carefully. I won't let anything go wrong."

The next day, there was no summons to the Dean's office. There had been no alarms, no spells to warn of tampering with the rocks far down in the valley or intruders in the tunnel. All year they had practiced with wards in Charms class, and learned about Alarm Spells and other magical triggers that could be invoked by a broken or crossed ward. Spells that would detect intruders, like Muggle security systems, were not easy to enchant and make persistent and unseen.

For the next two weeks, Alexandra spent time every evening down in the river valley, digging behind a thorny thicket of bushes splayed against the red rock twenty yards from the sealed tunnel. Maybe there was no alarm spell, but she thought simply digging away the entrance they already knew about was too obvious. So she used

magic to dig another tunnel, a small one, just large enough for her to crawl through in a hurry, and she used a Glamour Charm to hide it, in the unlikely event that someone would look behind the thorny bushes.

Magic could tunnel through solid rock faster than a jackhammer, but Alexandra couldn't make rock simply melt away, and she couldn't spend too much time each evening. So she patiently excavated a little at a time, expecting to have a tunnel all the way to the larger one completed by the week before their final exams.

---

School work had been going well. In Mr. Grue's class, Alexandra was mixing a solvent capable of dissolving bones and teeth for her final project.

"This isn't the branch of potions-making that leads to memory alchemy," Mr. Grue said. His tone was as gruff as always, but he actually seemed curious as to what Alexandra was up to.

Alexandra pointed to the American Potioneering Society's Expanded Table of Alchemical Works. "Solvents are one of the five essential categories of non-imbibables," she said. "I need to brew solutions of up to the second degree from each category for a Journeyman Potioneering license, which is required to do research in -"

"Don't recite alchemical charts and APS requirements to me!" Grue snapped. "I know them better than you know the back of your hand!"

"Then why are you asking me why I'm working on something you know I'll need to learn?"

Mr. Grue's large, hairy hands opened and closed as if they were squishing an imagined neck. Then he said, "When did you begin thinking ahead, Miss Quick?" He waved a hand to cut her off. "You won't even qualify for an Apprentice Potioneering license before you graduate." He moved away.

*I may not have a lot of time after I graduate,* she thought, but she had more immediate plans for a bone-dissolving solvent.

On a warm evening at the end of May, her excavation down in the valley reached the tunnel. She widened the hole just enough for her

to fit through without squeezing, and told Anna that night that she would be executing her plan that Sunday.

"You can't do it alone," Anna said.

"I have to do it alone. No one but me can face my Nemesis."

"Let me watch with Jingwei," Anna pleaded. "I promise not to interfere, except to run for help if something goes wrong."

Alexandra raised an eyebrow. "So if I'm getting my butt kicked by the baby mummy and it's trying to kill me, you won't put yourself in danger?"

Anna swallowed. "I'll go get help."

"On your witch's honor?"

Anna's voice was a whisper: "On my witch's honor."

Alexandra wondered if she would keep a similar promise. What if Maximilian had made her promise not to do anything at the Gift Place, instead of tricking her to send her away?

*No*, she thought, *Max knew he was going to die, and I'm not planning to die*. "Okay. You can come. But you'll need a broom to follow me."

"I can borrow David's."

"Fine." Alexandra gave Anna a smile she hoped conveyed confidence. "I'm going to recon and practice tonight. You cover for me in the library. You can tell the 'Alexandra Committee' that I'm planning something, but only I get to tell them the plan, and only when I'm ready."

Over the past couple of weeks, while she'd been brewing her bone-dissolving solvent, she'd sneaked a bit of it out, a few drops at a time, and now she had a full flask of it. She kept it carefully wrapped and sealed in a box in her magical backpack, but she didn't take her pack with her that night when she sneaked outside, only her Seven-League Boots, which were helpful for moving around quickly when no one was watching.

She brought Charlie and Nigel with her. Until just before sundown, she tried to repeat the Engorgement spell she had cast spontaneously when Larry had surprised her. She could make the small brown snake swell to the size of a python now, which was something that would impress Mr. Hobbes for her SPAWN, but she wanted the gigantic snake that had frightened Larry, or better yet, the dragon-sized monster that Henry Tsotsie had created, and so far that seemed to be beyond her ability.

As the sun fell beneath the mountains to the east and twilight descended on Charmbridge and the surrounding woods, Alexandra picked Nigel up and tucked the snake into her sleeve. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, then stepped between two trees at the edge of the lawn. Another step took her deeper into the woods, beyond the sight of Charmbridge Academy. She walked to the very border of the protective charms, and searched the trees and bushes and undergrowth for her Nemesis.

"I know you're out there," she said. She reached a hand out to touch the wards - or rather, to feel their presence. The wards that kept her safe, that kept the monster on the other side.

She was pretty sure they didn't extend into the tunnels beneath the school, where the Mors Mortis Society had gathered.

Charlie cawed a warning, then flapped away. Alexandra heard the wings of a pursuer beating the air, and drew her wand angrily.

"Get lost!" she yelled. She wasn't surprised that it was Larry once again, pausing as he stepped between two trees to tug at his cloak when it caught on a protruding branch.

"What are you up to out in the woods?" he asked.

"Why are you following me around and keeping tabs on what I do?"

"Curiosity. Either you're sneaking around outside in the evening to make everyone think you're up to something, or you really are up to something." Larry took a cigarette out of his pocket and waved the tip at her, a few inches from her wand. "Light?"

"*Incendere*," she said, and the entire cigarette ignited, flaring hot enough to burn his fingers before he dropped it.

He cursed and shook his hand in the air. "Bitch."

"I'll remember that," she said coldly. "Now call your familiar back."

"Or what?" He took out another cigarette and lit it with his own wand. "That fat raven of yours needs more exercise, I see it lurking around out here all the time." He brushed past Alexandra with an insouciant smirk.

"Charlie's not fat. You probably saw my father's raven," she said.

He wagged his cigarette at her. "Not falling for that one."

Alexandra realized suddenly that Larry was walking very close to the edge of the protective wards. "Fine. You caught me doing my Dark Arts rituals. I'm going back inside. Charlie!" She walked several paces toward the school, then stopped when she saw that Larry wasn't moving.

"You're really eager to get rid of me," he said.

"Duh. Like a zit."

He scratched his chin and looked around.

"No, seriously, would you just leave me alone?" she said. "I haven't bothered you all semester."

"You always bother me, Quick." Larry wandered further from her, still peering about as if hoping to find evidence of actual Dark rituals.

"Go away!" she yelled, as he stepped across the invisible boundary marking Charmbridge's protective radius.

"Nothing's stopping you from going away," he said, puffing on his cigarette. "Yet here you are, yelling at me. What are you trying to hide?" He turned back around and seemed to be taking immeasurable satisfaction in her helpless anger.

She clenched her teeth, torn between yelling again, this time to tell him he was in danger, and simply walking away. The creature was after her, not him, and it seemed to be very good at staying hidden from everyone else. At times she almost doubted herself that it was really out there.

Then she thought of Martha. "Larry, don't - come here."

"Don't come here?" He cocked his head.

"I mean come here! Come away from there. I'll tell you everything if you come with me."

"Hah. You are desperate. What are you hiding out here?" He turned his back on her and cast a Light Spell, holding his wand high.

"Larry!" She felt goosebumps, almost like a premonition, just before something sprang from the shadows and dragged him to the ground.

She tried to use a Repulsion Jinx to separate them, but Larry and the small skeletal figure were rolling in the leaves, Larry's cloak tangled around his limbs and the thing's skull. He struggled to point his wand at it when its beak slashed at his neck. He brought his chin down just in time to avoid getting his throat torn open, and instead a red gash opened like a second mouth just below his lips. He cried out and dropped his wand.

Alexandra thought of fire, frost, lightning, spines, wind, and scouring sand - all those things would harm Larry more than the mummified creature. A Deadweight Spell would pin it on top of him.

"*Levicorpus*," she said, and the thing's shriveled feet rose into the air, but it clung to Larry with those tiny, inhumanly strong hands. Larry clutched at its beak with both hands, trying without success to keep its bony jaws together. Blood was pouring across his chin and neck. Alexandra cast three hexes in a row that would have felled a tree and probably slain a man. They struck the child-sized monster and tore it away from Larry, but it only flew a few yards. Already it was on its feet again. Its empty, fathomless eye sockets seemed to bore into her and Larry both. And Larry was on the other side of the protective wards.

"All right, then," Alexandra said. She leaped forward, through the wards, and ran past Larry. "Come and get me!"

The thing lurched after her immediately. She didn't have her broom, but she could outrun it in her Seven-League Boots, and she thought she could lead it through the woods to the cliff, and then -

There was a pop of Apparition, and Larry appeared between her and the monster. It ran into him and the two of them tumbled to the ground at Alexandra's feet, throwing leaves into the air.

"What are you doing?" Alexandra shouted.

The monster's mouth gaped wide. Larry tried to push its head away, and ended up grabbing its lower jaw. His fingers hooked around the hard bony edge where its lip would be if it had any flesh, and then its jaws snapped together with a clack.

Larry screamed and held up a hand which spurted blood from the severed stumps of his fingers.

"No!" Alexandra cried out as the monster's beak plunged into Larry's stomach. Then it leaped at her and she stepped backward so suddenly that her Seven-League Boots almost sent her careening into a tree. The lightless void in the depths of the creature's eye sockets remained fixed on her and its beak glistened with dark red blood.

Larry lay on the ground groaning. His eyes were white-rimmed and wide with shock. His hands clutched at his stomach, stained with even more blood. The monster was rushing at her. She had no hope of carrying Larry to safety, she couldn't Apparate with him, she didn't know how mortal his wound might be -

*I need Ms. Grimm, she thought. I need the adults. I need them now.*

She ran, firing red flares from her wand into the sky. The creature followed. She led it away from Larry, then abruptly veered left and dashed out of the trees and straight toward the far side of Charmbridge Academy's grounds, and the valley that lay beyond. As she went through the wards, she spoke her Name and an Invitation to her Nemesis.

She couldn't knock the invisible barrier down or undo it or move it, but she could pry open a gap and *weaken* it. And she hoped - prayed - that when she did, the Dean, Ms. Shirliffe, the other teachers who helped maintain Charmbridge's magical defenses, would know and come Apparating.



In the dim twilight, the monster came running out of the woods and across the threshold of the magical wards, a shadowy abomination with an unnatural spider-like gait and the speed of a sprinting man.

Alexandra gauged the distance between herself and the thing pursuing her, and risked a glance over her shoulder. There were some other students out on the grass, and further away, the Quodpot team was practicing. She heard the detonation of one of their Quods. A few of them were looking in her direction, having seen the sparks from her wand.

This wasn't at all the way she'd planned it. It was supposed to be just her and her Nemesis with no one else around.

Alexandra raised her wand to slow the baby mummy down with a Deadweight Spell. Then a massive sound drowned out everything else.

With a furious explosion of sound and motion, the night itself seemed to come alive, and birds came pouring out of the darkling woods.

"Oh, shit," Alexandra groaned.

The trees were all filled with screeching and cawing and the beating of wings, and a murderous tide of beaks and talons and feathers swept across the fields like darkness itself. Every crow in the woods came screaming at Alexandra.

The Nemesis was close enough that she could see the darkness where its eyes should be. She cast a lightning bolt at it. It struck the creature with a loud, crackling flash and sent it rolling backward through the trees like a smoking ball of burnt cloth and rubbish.

It only took a moment for it to rise and come charging at her again, with a furious black maelstrom of birds in its wake.

Alexandra took the most direct path she could see across the fields toward the river valley. She shot past the stunned students, yelling, "Run! Get help!"

In her Seven-League Boots, she outdistanced the monster and the crows alike. The cacophony of the avian horde filled her ears even over the rushing of wind. The fates of Charlie and Larry worried her,

but she couldn't turn back; she would just have to hope someone got to Larry quickly, that the adults could turn back the birds.

She had barely started breathing hard by the time she reached the cliff above her almost-finished tunnel entrance. She stared down at the hard red rocks, many hundreds of feet below, then checked over her shoulder.

The crows had stopped pursuing her. They were swarming across Charmbridge's lawn, and Alexandra gasped as she saw students running back to the school building in a panic, beset by birds.

"Oh no," she breathed.

She couldn't see her Nemesis, then realized that by the time she did, it would be too close.

She had planned to have her broom and her Skyhook and her bone-dissolving solvent and all her other weapons with which to try to destroy the creature. Now she was cornered, and all she had left was her plan of last resort. And she knew only one way to beat the monster down the cliff.

She'd never practiced a Falling Charm from such a height - not on herself.

*It worked for Trish*, she thought, and she cast the Charm and jumped.

Magic, as Mr. Newton reminded them often, could not grant the power of flight. But falling a quarter of a mile in a gentle descent that became gentler the closer she got to the ground was such a thrilling experience, Alexandra had a moment to wonder why more wizards didn't do this just for the fun of it. She should try doing this from a broom, *really* high up!

The absurd, out-of-place thought came to an abrupt end as she landed hard. Her feet slammed into the ground and the shock traveled up her legs and body. She skidded and fell onto her side, scraping skin from her elbow to her wrist and almost hitting her head. If she'd landed at a slightly different angle or stiffened her legs just a fraction of a second too early, she would have broken an ankle or worse.

High above, she saw a bump at the top of the cliff which moved right over the edge and began scaling down the cliff like a giant beetle. The monster didn't jump - it just crawled down the vertical rock face at the same speed it ran. Alexandra thought about casting another barrage of spells at it, but realized that wouldn't hurt it and might just knock it off the cliff and bring it to the ground faster. Instead, she leaped to her feet and ran to the small tunnel she had been carving for the past couple of weeks. She threw herself down it, scrambling on hands and knees and ignoring the scraped skin, until she reached the remaining foot or so of rock.

No time for careful digging and worrying about detection now. She blasted away the rock with a violence that sent smoke and dust billowing around her. Some of it went up her nose and she struggled fiercely to keep from sneezing. A dark hole appeared before her and cold air blew against her face. Without looking back, she dived headfirst into the hole and squeezed herself through. Her robes caught on the shattered bits of rock and for a moment, she wasn't sure the opening was wide enough. Then she landed with a grunt on cold, hard stone. She cast a Light Spell, and saw a tunnel that looked very much like the one she had once traveled down to the chamber to the gate to the Lands Below.

She rose to her feet and took a few quick breaths. She heard something moving - skittering - down the tunnel through which she had just crawled.

She could have brought the smaller tunnel down, burying the creature. It was tempting.

*But I already tried that.* A burning hogan collapsed on the monster while it was pinned to the ground with a Deadweight Spell. Trapped in the center of an inferno that left nothing else behind - and it had gotten away.

Alexandra didn't need to run now. She covered half the length of the sealed tunnel in a few steps. It took her only seconds to reach a familiar juncture.

To her right was a large cavern with an unnatural clay floor: the gateway to the Lands Below. Directly in front of her, she would find a smaller chamber with a flat section of wall on which were painted old Indian figures of people and monsters, and with the right spells, the

wall paintings would move aside, the stone would turn black, and a gateway to the Lands Beyond would open.

No, the chambers beneath Charmbridge Academy hadn't really been made inaccessible. She wondered if they *could* be made truly inaccessible.

She entered the cavern with the clay floor. She and Maximilian had passed through this cave on their journey to the Lands Below. Only she had returned. She'd passed through it a second time, pursuing Darla and Innocence. That time, she'd come back with the other two girls.

She reached into her pocket and took out the coin her father had given her. The Token. She hadn't been planning to try this unless everything else failed.

Something was coming down the tunnel. Something moving quickly on skeletal feet. Something *skittering* toward her.

The Nemesis came around the corner. It didn't pause the way a person or any other living creature would. It just kept coming, straight at her.

With the image of Larry staring at the stumps of his fingers burned into her brain, Alexandra brought her wand down in a forceful gesture and said, "*Feordupois*."

The creature slowed but didn't falter as it continued to advance on her. Even after Alexandra cast the Deadweight Spell five more times, the little monster's limbs twitched and its beak clacked open and shut. The great weight pinning it to the ground didn't seem to hurt or tire it. It could wait forever if it had to, but the spell would release its hold much sooner than that.

Alexandra knelt next to the thrashing creature. She flinched when its beak gouged the clay next to her foot, but she held the gold token in an upraised fist and stared directly into one of its dark, empty eye sockets.

She hadn't composed a rhyme for this. The only thing that mattered in Naming magic was the Names. Either they would work or they wouldn't. The other words weren't really important.

*"By my Name, Troublesome," she said, "I Name thee Nemesis, and rename thee - Gift!"*

She thrust her fist into its eye socket as if her arm were a snake, striking and withdrawing. She left the Token glittering inside its skull as she rose and, in stepping back, almost leaped into the wall behind her.

The clay at the center of the chamber turned smoky and dark, and then it was just smoke. For an instant, the stunted, withered thing that might once have been a child, or part of one, was flailing in the dark hazy air and glaring at her with all the hatefulness those empty black voids could contain.

"My Gift to the Generous Ones," Alexandra said, with not a little spite, and the Nemesis plunged into the abyss. The intangible black smoke slowly stopped writhing, solidified, and became clay once more.

Alexandra sagged a little, as the adrenaline rush of the last few minutes subsided. Then she laughed. Maybe things hadn't quite gone according to plan - originally, she had conceived of several attempts to destroy the monster before resorting to her father's Token and a crude attempt at Naming magic to get rid of it - but all things considered, she'd gotten off pretty lightly. A few scrapes and bruises.

Her laughter faded. Damn it, why did Larry have to interfere? And the crows - where had they come from?

A mocking laugh echoed her own - a strange, wicked sound, familiar yet inhuman. Alexandra turned, as goosebumps crawled up her arms.

Before her on the floor of the cavern was a raven, watching her with small, black eyes.

It was a large raven. It was dirty and ragged and had the look of a creature that spent its time outdoors fighting other ravens, not sleeping comfortably indoors and eating owl treats.

"Who are you?" Alexandra asked, with growing dread.

The raven swelled in size. It raised its wings above its head, and its enormous black feathers shrank and melted away. Its beak became a nose as its eyes turned white. Its bent bird legs became the long legs of a man in brown rawhide pants. The feathers around the crown of its head lengthened and the quills became skinnier and skinnier until they were strands of long, black hair.

All this happened in the space of one breath, and John Manuelito stood before her. Alexandra raised her wand, but he was faster, catching her wrist in one hand as he swung his fist into her face.

Alexandra had been hit before, but she'd never been punched in the face by a grown man using all his might. The blow snapped her head back and bounced it against the stone wall behind her. Stunned and dizzy, she slid to the floor as her wand fell from her fingers.

John Manuelito loomed over her. She tried to stand, but her hands slipped and scraped against the rocks. John stepped on her thigh with a leather-clad foot and put his weight on it, pinning her to the ground as pain speared up and down her leg.

He stooped, casually, and picked up Alexandra's wand. She moaned. Her nose made gurgling sounds when she tried to breathe through it. John gripped the ends of her wand in both hands and snapped it over his knee. There was a greenish flash and wisps of black smoke curled out of its ends. He tossed the broken halves away.

Alexandra's lips moved. She tried to think of some magic she could wield: a rhyme, a Name, anything.

John laughed again, sounding no more human than when he'd been a raven. His fist drew back slowly and deliberately, then came crashing into her face a second time. Alexandra's consciousness dissolved in a red mist of shock and pain.

## What You Were Born For

When Alexandra regained awareness, it was in a haze of numbness and pain. Her face hurt, which didn't surprise her, but she could barely feel her hands and feet. She was on her back, and she couldn't move. Other than her extremities, she felt discomfort all over her body. Her nose seemed to have closed completely, so she sucked air between her teeth. Her teeth hurt, too; probing with her tongue confirmed that some of them were loose and at least one was broken. She coughed and spit out a mouthful of blood.

Steady light from a single source illuminated the stone ceiling above. She was still in the cavern with the clay floor. She couldn't guess how long she'd been unconscious.

Someone was moving about in the shadows at the edge of the circle of light, mumbling something - no, chanting - and making gestures with his hands that Alexandra couldn't quite make out, even when she turned her head to look at him.

A glowing wand lay on the ground within arm's reach. But when Alexandra tried to move, she realized something was holding her wrists and ankles in a grip so tight that it was cutting off blood circulation. She rolled her head about to see her hands, then lifted her head to see her feet, and made a choking sound. She was spread-eagled across the clay center of the chamber, stretched as far as she could be stretched without breaking her limbs. Stone hands rising out of the floor pulled her arms and legs in four directions. She struggled briefly and only succeeded in causing herself more pain. Her stretched muscles and tendons screamed in protest, and her joints, from her shoulders to her knees, felt close to snapping.

She closed her eyes and tried breathing slowly, searching for calm and rational thought. It was very hard, with her heart thumping so loudly.

She tried to think of a rhyme. Doggerel verse might be her only hope.

*"Stone hands on me, let me go -"*

The other person stopped his chanting. Alexandra's eyes snapped open.

*"Release my -"*

John Manuelito slid closer to her, still crouched low. He was wearing only those brown rawhide pants and boots. His chest was bare and his face was decorated with black and red streaks that made him look ghastly in the shadows cast by his wand.

He punched Alexandra in the stomach, and she wheezed in agony. For several terrible seconds, she thought she would suffocate, unable to take a breath and very close to throwing up.

"What do you think you're going to do without a wand?" John asked.

Alexandra's first response after finally drawing a breath was an inarticulate cry as she jerked her entire body in an effort to free herself, willing with all her might for the stone hands to shatter.

Where the bones in her wrists and ankles ground against unyielding stone, stabs of pain shot through the numbness, and her spine felt as if she were being twisted on a torturer's rack, though in fact she was barely able to move at all despite all her squirming.

John laughed. "Keep it up. Feel free to scream, too."

Alexandra stopped struggling. It was cold down here, but she was soaked in sweat and panting. Finally, she said, "Ms. Grimm. The wards -"

"Yes, I'm a trespasser, aren't I? Except that you already triggered the alarm for me. I've been trying to figure out for days how to slip past the wards without that bitch noticing, and all I had to do was follow the Nemesis Spirit after you let it in. The crows will keep Dean Grimm and her staff preoccupied for a while." John laughed again, low and sinister. "You got me in here, and then you delivered yourself right where I wanted you. I couldn't have planned this better if I'd tried."

Alexandra groaned. Something was crawling around in the sleeve of her robe. Nigel. Her poor familiar. She hoped Charlie hadn't followed her. She struggled to form a more coherent sentence. "They'll know... we're in the tunnels."

"Oh, they'll figure it out soon enough, but not in time to save you. I also opened the Veil. There's a protective circle around us, but not



around the portal to the Lands Beyond, so the deans and teachers are going to be busy trying to save all the other little brats up there."

As if to confirm his words, something black and spectral glided through the air near the ceiling, indistinct in the wand light, but radiating malice. It hovered there for a moment, then faded insubstantially back through the rocks above them.

Alexandra gasped. "You unleashed - *Chindi* - in the school?"

"I wish I could be up there to see it. But I'm hoping killing you will cause even more chaos." Alexandra had not noticed the knife before, but John held it in front of her face now. It was made of polished black stone, with a shiny, glass-like edge. "It's what you were born for."

"What?" Alexandra was all out of clever words or ideas.

"You were supposed to be sacrificed. That's what everyone in the Dark Convention says. Abraham Thorn was told that before you were born. He was going to use you to destroy the Confederation's power. But apparently the great Enemy couldn't bear to sacrifice his little girl." John sneered. "I don't know if any of that is true. I don't think much of soothsaying. But enough people believe in some stupid prophecy that I figure it's worth trying. At the very least, I'll get credit for killing you and doing what your daddy wouldn't. And who knows, maybe sacrificing you really will break this seal over the Lands Below wide open."

Alexandra gulped. "That's... that's bullshit. There is no prophecy."

John shrugged. "Who cares? I win either way." Idly, he jabbed the point of the knife into the underside of her arm. Alexandra held very still, swallowing the cry of pain that almost escaped her, though she couldn't prevent the tears leaking from her eyes. Nigel was close to where John's knife had stabbed her, and absurdly, she was worried about her familiar. She feared John would find the snake and kill it out of spite before using the knife on her.

*Hold still, Nigel!* she thought desperately, feeling the snake squirm beneath her robes, but John didn't notice.

"I was going to skin you alive," John said, "but I'm afraid I don't have enough time. How about cutting off your face and palms and the

soles of your feet?" He laid the point of his knife against her cheek, just beneath her left eye.

Nausea wracked Alexandra's body, and that made the pain worse. She fought to suppress a shudder. John was watching her face with something akin to lust - not lust for her, but a desire to see her terrified and pleading. Her throat felt like a rock was lodged within it, and she forced herself to stare back at him.

"Ms. Grimm will be here any second," she said. Her voice was like a dry heave. "Or my father."

She had no reason to believe this. She was sure John didn't believe it. She was trying to gather her courage. Whatever he did to her, she would not scream.

"I doubt it," John said, "But I do hate to work in a hurry; it spoils the effect if it's not done properly. So, I'll settle for another traditional method." He raised the knife and flipped around so its point was downward. "I'm going to cut out your beating heart."

"That's not even a Navajo tradition!" Alexandra squirmed in spite of herself, painfully grinding her wrists and ankles against the stone hands. "That's, like, Aztec or something!"

His leer was ecstatic, demonic. "A witch uses whatever works, and so much the better if we spit on tradition in the process."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Alexandra asked hoarsely.

"Playing for time?" John cut through one of the knots tying the front of her robe. He showed teeth again, then without warning, he slashed her face with an angry gesture. Alexandra gasped at the shock and suddenness of it; the pain only came an instant later. "Why? You came to Din<sup>o</sup>tah to meddle in Indian affairs. Meddling in the affairs of *witches* -" He slashed again. Alexandra felt a sharp sting, but couldn't tell how deeply he'd cut her. She bit her lip to keep from screaming. " - meddling in the affairs of the *Dark Convention*!" Another slash. "You made me look pretty damn stupid. I lost a lot of face among my fellow witches. They blamed *me* for our plans being disrupted by a *belagana* girl. And the Dark Convention wasn't amused either. You have no idea what I've done to prove myself, to be able to lead a coven, and I got foiled by a *ninth-grader*?" With each angry word, he cut her again. Alexandra shuddered and felt

blood flowing across her face and trickling down her neck. Finally he laid his knife against her cheek again. "You've caused me a lot of *trouble*. You shouldn't have interfered."

Alexandra forced herself not to flinch, trying not to think about the point of the knife only an inch from her eye. "You tried to kill me!"

"I didn't *care* about you after I left Charmbridge, until you came after me. What were you trying to do, avenge your brother? I'm not the one who killed him."

"You..." Alexandra licked her lips, and tasted blood. "You and Mary tried to kill me as soon as I got here. The murder of crows and the mandrakes and -"

"Mandrakes? Mary?" John lifted the knife away from her face. "What are you talking about?"

"Mary Dearborn!" Alexandra couldn't understand why John was feigning ignorance when he gloated about everything else.

"You mean Darla's little sister?" John shook his head. "I knew Darla's older sister when she was still in the Mors Mortis Society, but what does the younger one have to do with anything?" He grinned. "Has she taken up Dark Arts too? Did she try to kill you? That's beautiful. It's a shame I couldn't bring her down here to watch you die."

Alexandra's voice trembled, and she knew her self-control was slipping away from her. "She wants you to pay for killing Darla."

John laughed. "Didn't you kill Darla?"

"No! It's all your fault!" She was almost raving now. "You got her involved in Dark Arts. You... manipulated her, made her do things -"

"I didn't *make* that stupid little bitch do anything. Oh, I enjoyed watching her descent, but believe me, she was willing. She told herself, and me, that it was all for her sister, but she wanted to be Dark, she wanted it all."

"You're insane." Now Alexandra's body wouldn't stop shaking. Tears mixed with blood on her face.

"I guess we've run out of things to talk about." John slashed the front of her robes with his knife. "Just as well - someone will come looking for you once they banish the Chindi."

He tore open the front of her shirt in one violent gesture. Alexandra screamed and tried to twist away from him and only caused herself more agony. Her back groaned in protest and pain flashed through her wrists and ankles where the crushing grip of the stone hands threatened to break them. John clamped one hand around her throat and pinned her to the ground, making even the minimal amount of movement she was capable of impossible. Her chest, covered only by a thin bra, was exposed to John and his knife. He held the point above the bare flesh over her beating heart, then said, "What?"

"What?" Alexandra echoed, though with his hand squeezing her neck it came out as an inarticulate gulp. Something was sliding against her skin, coiled over her chest.

Nigel hissed and struck. John cried out in astonishment more than pain as the snake bit him in the neck. With a furious gesture, he grabbed the snake and hurled it across the cavern, then clamped a hand to his neck.

"A snake?" he said. "What is it with you and snakes?"

"Nigel," Alexandra rasped. "His Name is Nigel. You conjured him. You tortured him. Remember?" She concentrated with all her might - which was not much, in her present circumstances. As before she had no way of knowing what it might accomplish, but with the last of her willpower, she said, "Face *your* Nemesis, asshole."

A monster with a head as large as Alexandra's body filled the chamber and hissed fiercely.

John had already snatched up his wand. He pointed it at the snake and said, "*Crucio!*"

Instantly, the giant snake began thrashing wildly. One enormous coil rolled over Alexandra, bruising her ribs and crushing what remaining breath she had out of her. John stumbled backward to avoid being rolled over as well, and Nigel's tail caught him beneath the knees and knocked his feet out from under him. Rather than trying to stand up, John rolled quickly to the nearest rock wall and crouched there in the corner. The snake began to coil up again.

Alexandra felt, more than saw, the snake's head hovering over her, with the light from John's wand now moving about and causing shadows to flicker and rotate crazily about the chamber.

Something flicked over her, and Alexandra realized it was Nigel's tongue, which was now larger than his body normally was. Nigel was tasting her and the air around her.

"*Reducio*," said John.

Nigel shrank, disappearing from Alexandra's sight.

John struggled to his feet. "I don't know how you did that, but -" He put a hand to his neck again. Alexandra couldn't see his expression, as the light from his wand was dimming, so his face was now entirely shadowed, but he seemed less steady than before. His voice wavered. "What... Ugh."

As his wand dimmed, so did the grip on Alexandra's wrists and ankles. She didn't know if John was weakening somehow, or if Nigel had perhaps cracked one of the stone hands while rolling over them, but with desperate strength, she yanked hard, ignoring the screaming pain in her shoulder and the burning as her wrist slid free of the manacle-grip of the stone hand, scraping off layers of skin in the process.

"Your snake... bit me," John said. He hissed. "I can feel the venom."

That wasn't possible. Nigel was just an ordinary brown snake. But John was stepping toward her. Light reflected off dark volcanic glass from the knife lying where he had dropped it.

He stood over Alexandra and pointed his wand at her. Alexandra snatched up the knife and slashed the only part of him she could reach: his ankle. He screamed as its razor-sharp edge sliced through the rawhide pants and boots and cut him to the bone. Blood splattered on her as he fell to one knee. Alexandra slashed at him again. She didn't see where she cut him, just felt the knife slice something, and he dropped his wand and rolled away.

"Bitch!" he gasped.

Still held by three stone hands, Alexandra raised her one free arm and brought the knife down as hard as she could, point-first, on

John's wand. The stone bit deeply into the wood, bit through it and into the clay floor beneath, and the blade broke. Alexandra's hand spasmed and she lost her grip just as the wand's light went out.

The stone hands released their grip in the same instant, as if they had simply fallen away. With her other wrist and ankles free, Alexandra rolled onto her side with a groan.

"Now you don't have a wand," she gasped out. "And I have the knife."

It was pitch black, so John couldn't see that the stone blade had snapped. Did he see it break before the light went out?

In the darkness, she heard John dragging himself to his feet.

Even if he was poisoned and bleeding, she wasn't in much better shape. So she held very still, not making a sound. She held her breath, and in the tense silence, a fierce hiss filled the room. Was that Nigel, or a Chindi?

John made a noise deep in his throat, and Alexandra heard him slide away from her. He grunted as he stumbled into the wall, and then he was in the tunnel outside.

He was getting away.

Alexandra coughed and turned her head to spit weakly, a mixture of blood and vomit. She forced herself up onto her knees. This caused such a wave of dizziness that she almost pitched forward again headfirst into the floor. After a moment, she felt strong enough to rise unsteadily to her feet, where she wobbled and swayed before once again regaining some equilibrium. Her body hurt all over and her face was a bleeding, swollen mess, what she could feel of it. She thought she might have a concussion.

Down the tunnel, she heard John's shuffling footsteps. She thought it was in the direction of the outside and the valley, though she was uncertain of her orientation now.

Pulling her torn shirt and robes together and holding them with one hand, she staggered after John, dripping blood in her wake. She didn't know how she could stop him without a wand, but she wasn't

going to let him get away, and that one irrational thought drove her forward.

*He can't get away.*

John might have heard her following after him down the tunnel, but he didn't stop or turn to fight her. Maybe he feared Charmbridge faculty members arriving soon. Maybe he was more badly hurt than she was. Maybe he really was poisoned. Alexandra liked to think he was afraid of her. She told herself he was a coward, and she thought about Darla, and Mary, and Max, and she kept going.

It was an eerily silent chase. Neither of them said anything. She knew they were at the end of the tunnel when she heard dirt and rocks rolling to the floor as John crawled back through the passageway she had excavated. She followed, despite knowing that John could ambush her there or when she emerged.

But when she half-crawled, half-fell onto the rocky slope overgrown with bushes overlooking the river, she saw John standing in the moonlight down on flatter ground, with his back to her. She made it onto her hands and knees, but when she tried to rise to her feet again, her strength gave out, and she ended up tumbling and sliding down the slope, collecting more scrapes and tears in her clothing and skin.

"Alexandra! Alexandra!" In the black of night, stars went out above her as Charlie passed overhead.

"Bring help, Charlie," Alexandra whispered. Her voice was so weak, she wasn't sure if her raven could hear her, but John must have. He turned his head toward her. She could only see his teeth and his eyes, which gleamed madly. Then he leaped into the air and transformed into a raven.

In raven form, he was larger than Charlie. He flapped skyward, reaching the treetops and quickly ascending toward the height of the cliffs above. Charlie cawed and swerved toward the other bird, and Alexandra cried, "Charlie, no!"

Something else descended from the sky. Powerful black wings beat the air and with a chilling screech, the thing struck the larger raven. The two of them plummeted straight down, the raven that was John in the claws of the other bird. Charlie screeched and veered away.

Only a few yards from Alexandra, the other bird spread its wings, released its prey, which struck the ground with a thump, and landed next to it.

It was a large black owl. It stared at Alexandra with round, yellow eyes as inhuman as any she'd ever seen.

Then the owl stretched and grew. Its head narrowed, its feathers became hair and clothes.

The raven, too, was transforming. It lay at the owl's feet in broken, feathered form, but slowly regained the form of a man - a man with a broken back, staring lifelessly up at the sky, at the feet of Diana Grimm.

Alexandra stood up, trembling. When Charlie descended to land on her shoulder, the slight weight of the bird almost drove her to her knees, and Charlie immediately took off again and perched on a nearby bush, croaking, "Alexandra."

"You killed him," Alexandra said, staring with horror at John Manuelito.

"He was an enemy of the Confederation," the Special Inquisitor said, with no trace of emotion.

Alexandra was never sure afterward if Diana Grimm caught her when she fainted. Although she was told that it was her aunt who carried her back to Charmbridge Academy and brought her to the infirmary, the only image she could remember was Diana Grimm standing over the body of John Manuelito with an expression of icy coldness, unmoving even as Alexandra toppled to the ground, unable to stay on her feet any longer and surrendering to unconsciousness.



## Without a Wand

Alexandra was not alone in the infirmary. There were others, too weak or terrified to leave their beds. The students who had been attacked by crows were scratched and bloodied, but few had been seriously hurt, and Mrs. Murphy was able to attend to most of their wounds with healing salve and charms. Those who had been attacked by Chindi, however, lay in their beds shivering and jumping at shadows, even when there weren't any.

Four students had been sent to the Queen of Chicago Sanatorium. Two of them were members of the JROC who'd tried to protect younger students from the angry birds and malevolent wraiths that had swarmed the school. One was Larry Albo.

More students trickled into the infirmary all day, afflicted with chills and weakness, dread, and other, vaguer symptoms. They described feeling like someone was treading on their grave. Mrs. Murphy gave them Soothing Potions and told them there were no charms to banish a malady she didn't even understand. Healers from Chicago had told her that there was little they could do either. They were hoping everyone would simply recover on their own.

Alexandra was kept in a partitioned corner of the infirmary, isolated from everyone else. Supposedly for her privacy, but she knew better. She heard the whispers.

Mrs. Murphy was not as cheery as usual, but she was kindly as she checked Alexandra's bandages. After a night's sleep, the bruises and swelling in her wrists and ankles were fading, and while the skin was still raw, it no longer hurt quite so much. A half-cup of Fudd's Grow-All had mended her jaw, with a great deal of discomfort that kept her awake all night and unable to eat a thing. Fudd's Grow-All didn't repair broken noses, so the nurse used some magic to straighten it, but told her it would have to finish healing on its own.

The Fudd's Grow-All and Mrs. Murphy's efforts had mended most of Alexandra's loose and broken teeth, but one was gone, and teeth could not be regrown from scratch.

"There are Artificers who make the most amazing replacement teeth," Mrs. Murphy said encouragingly. "No one can tell they aren't the real thing, and a Sticking Charm will hold one in place indefinitely."

Alexandra looked in the magic mirror that Anna had brought from their room and touched the gap where John Manuelito's fist had knocked out one of her cuspids. There wasn't a lot that even a magic mirror could do to improve the look of a missing tooth. The bandages wrapped around her face were also hard to make decorative, though her reflected image did for an instant take on a rugged piratical look, complete with an eyepatch and a black pirate's hat, in which her injuries became proud wounds of war.

Alexandra couldn't smile. "What about fingers?" she asked.

Mrs. Murphy's smile faded also. "Fingers removed with Dark magic can't be reattached."

"Oh," Alexandra said.

Mrs. Murphy replaced the bandages on Alexandra's face. "These cuts will heal, if you don't open them again. I don't mind telling you, it took some pretty work, and I need to keep an eye on them. Without magical healing, you'd have more scars to match that one on your neck."

The cuts had been fairly deep, but Ms. Shirtliffe and Mr. Grue had examined the broken pieces of John Manuelito's black stone knife and declared that there were no curses on it. Alexandra touched her cheek and winced, earning a *tut-tut* from Mrs. Murphy.

"I guess I look pretty messed up," Alexandra said.

"Pretty bird," said Charlie.

The nurse had allowed Alexandra's familiar to sit in a cage by her bed, with the strict understanding that it was to stay there. Charlie's input reminded Alexandra of her other familiar, the one she had not found curled up against her body or hiding in any pockets or sleeves when she came to. Mrs. Murphy didn't know what had happened to Nigel, and was not very pleased about the possibility of a snake loose in the infirmary. Alexandra didn't think Nigel was hiding anywhere nearby, though.

"Well," Mrs. Murphy said, "your friends are here, right on schedule. I told them I'd be letting you out this morning."

Alexandra slid off the bed. She put on the clean robes Anna had brought her, and when she emerged from the small curtained enclosure around her bed, she found a small crowd waiting for her.

"Damn," David said, "you look messed up." He tried to sound flippant, but the huskiness in his voice belied his attempt to make light of her appearance.

Anna stood in front of Alexandra as if afraid to touch her in her bandaged, battered condition. Alexandra smiled, and Anna hugged her. Alexandra allowed Constance and Forbearance to embrace her, too. The twins were on the verge of tears. Along with David, hovering over their shoulders and crowding the corner of the infirmary were Innocence, Sonja, and Torvald.

"So, hear any good rumors?" Alexandra asked Sonja.

Sonja smiled nervously. "You were attacked by some kind of shapechanger, and you lost your hand. Also you were trying to resurrect the Mors Mortis Society, and you've been performing human sacrifices in the woods."

"Yeah, everyone's asking if I knew about that, since you and I were doing it out in the woods," Torvald said with a grin.

While Anna clapped a hand to her mouth, Constance and Forbearance's hands went to their cheeks.

Alexandra grimaced. "People are saying that?"

"That bothers you more than people saying you're performing human sacrifice?"

"It's more unbelievable," Alexandra said.

Torvald sighed, while David and Sonja snickered.

"All of you, return to your rooms," said Mrs. Murphy. "There are too many people here for you to be standing around chatting."

Innocence said, "I'm real glad you're mendin', Alex. I'll see you later, alright? I gots to check on William."

Alexandra sucked in a breath. "What happened to William?"

"He weren't struck bad as some, but..." Innocence's lip trembled for a moment.

"The boy's a hero," said Constance. "Him an' all the other regimenters what gallivanted about an' helped drive away them crows an' evil spirits."

"Innocence was right brave, too," said Forbearance.

Innocence shuffled her feet in an 'aw shucks' manner, but there was a blush of pride on her cheeks. "All I did was fetch that cymlin-head Ouida Noel outter the lavatory, since she got trapped there 'stead o' fleein' outside like a sensible person. William din't dare go into the ladies' room." Then she added in a mumble, "But my Banishin' Spell din't work quite proper. William was the one who done fended off the nasty spirits."

"Hush, Innocence Catharine," said Forbearance. "We'uns are very proud of both of you." She gave her sister a kiss on the cheek.

"I want to see William too," Alexandra said. She followed Innocence through the infirmary, with her friends trailing after her. Mrs. Murphy frowned at them, but she was too busy trying to calm a hysterical sophomore to chase after them for the moment.

William lay on a cot beneath a fluffy quilt that didn't look like one of the simple wool blankets Mrs. Murphy had been distributing. Innocence drew up short when she saw that her roommate, Ouida, was seated on a little stool next to him, looking quite out of place with her fancy robes and ribbon-bedecked hair. She turned to Innocence and the older teenagers, and said, "Oh, hello Innocence." Her gaze flickered to Alexandra nervously. "I was just keeping William company."

"She brought me muffins," William said.

"It was the least I could do. After all, he saved my life." Ouida turned back to William with a sigh. There was a tray on her lap with muffins that must have come directly from the kitchen, as they were still steaming.

"We done saved your life," Innocence said. "Did you bring a muffin for me?"

"It was no big deal," William said, as he began trying to sit up.

"Nonsense - it was the bravest thing I ever saw," Ouida said. "Oh, you must lie still! You need to rest." She tore a chunk off of one muffin, as if intending to offer it to William by hand.

"He hain't that limbered," Innocence said, bustling around William's bed to stand opposite her roommate. "William, is you gonna lie there like a scape-gallows?" Despite her words, there was concern in her voice, though something more than that in her expression as she regarded William and Ouida.

"I told all of you that there are too many people in the infirmary already," said Mrs. Murphy, who had come up behind Alexandra and her friends. "Everyone who's not sick or injured needs to leave, now."

The seventh grade girls both looked pleadingly at the nurse. Alexandra said, "Please let Innocence and Ouida stay with William, Mrs. Murphy. We're going." She leaned over William and said, "I'm glad you're all right, William. Just do what you're told, and heal up." She patted him on the shoulder, and left the infirmary, fighting off the queasy, wretched feeling that had not gone away since she'd first woken up.

As she walked toward her room with the rest of her friends, she said, "William... a hero. And Innocence."

"Speaking of heroics," David said, "I thought we all agreed that you *weren't* going to run off on some crazy mission all by yourself without telling us what you're up to?"

Alexandra glanced at Anna. "It was an accident that it happened the way it did. I didn't mean for things to go that way, or for it to happen last night."

"No," said an adult voice in a slow measured drawl that brought everyone to an immediate stop. Dean Grimm stepped through the archway ahead of them that separated the main corridor from the dorms and regarded Alexandra and her fellow students with a weighty, punishing stare. "You never do, do you, Miss Quick?"

The youths were all silent.

"I am pleased that you've been released from the infirmary," the Dean said. "Did Mrs. Murphy tell you that you require further healing?"

"No, ma'am," Alexandra said. "Not at the moment."

"Very good. Come to my office."

Alexandra and her friends all exchanged uneasy looks.

"That was not a request, Miss Quick. The rest of you may stop lingering about congesting the hallway."

Dean Grimm was an intimidating presence at the best of times, but there was a sharpness in her expression and an edge in her voice that communicated very clearly that she wasn't to be crossed now. Alexandra gave her friends a little nod, and reluctantly, eyes averted, they dispersed. Alexandra followed the Dean back to her office.

There was no sign of Galenthias. There was, however, a glass bowl on the Dean's desk, in which lay coiled a small, brown snake.

"Nigel!" Alexandra stepped past Ms. Grimm to lean over the bowl. Nigel was trying without success to climb the smooth interior of the glass. When she reached for the screen over the top of the bowl, Ms. Grimm flicked her wand. Sparks crackled around Alexandra's hand. She jerked her hand back, stung.

"Your serpentine familiar," Ms. Grimm said. "How long have you had it?"

"Two years," Alexandra said.

"It came from John Manuelito's wand - is that not so?" Ms. Grimm walked around her desk and sat down in her great leather chair, placing her hands on her desk with her wand in front of her.

"Yes," Alexandra said.

"Yes, *ma'am*." Ms. Grimm's voice was steely.

"Yes, ma'am," Alexandra repeated. She sensed she was in trouble, but she wasn't quite sure what had aroused the Dean's wrath to this degree.

"And it never occurred to you to wonder what sort of creature Mr. Manuelito conjured?"

"He's just a common brown snake," Alexandra said. "*A storeria dekayi*."

"According to Mr. Fledgefield, it's a rather uncommon brown snake. Native to Australia."

"Australia? That's impossible."

"I think it's far more possible that you need to spend more time studying herpetology before you make pets of snakes you rescue from Dark Wizards. Mr. Fledgefield and Mr. Grue have both confirmed that your 'Nigel' is extremely venomous. Mr. Grue tells me that besides anti-venom, he can make several rare potions from it."

"No!" Alexandra said. Bad enough having the Magizooology teacher examine Nigel; she was outraged that Mr. Grue had touched him.

Ms. Grimm's fingertips touched her wand. It was an amazingly sinister gesture for such a small motion. Alexandra sucked in a breath, trying to stay calm. "Nigel has never bitten me."

"Obviously."

"Nigel has never bitten anyone - except John. And that was when he was defending me."

"A snake has no conscience, no awareness of its mistress, no ability to distinguish between friend and enemy." The hard lines around Ms. Grimm's mouth softened, just a tiny bit. "You can't have it back. Venomous pets are forbidden at Charmbridge Academy, and it would be criminal to allow you to take such a creature back to your home."

Alexandra was surprised at the emotions she felt, and fought them as she said, "He's my familiar."

"You have a familiar. Sit down, Miss Quick. Nigel isn't the only thing we have to discuss."

Alexandra sat down in the chair opposite the Dean's desk, still keeping her eyes fixed on Nigel.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" Ms. Grimm asked.

Alexandra lifted her eyes to look at the Dean. "I survived another murder attempt."

"You created a weakness in the protective wards around the school. You allowed a Dark creature to enter the grounds. In so doing, you gave John Manuelito cover to follow, after he sent a murder of crows through the breach you created. For weeks you have been going out of bounds and creating a secret passage into the forbidden tunnels beneath this school, which we sealed off for reasons you know well. Everything that happened afterward - all the students who were injured, cursed, terrorized - was a consequence of that."

"I - I didn't mean for any of that to happen," Alexandra said.

"Oh, well, you didn't mean for it to happen. That makes everything better, then. Cleopatra Dupree lost an eye, but you didn't mean for that to happen. Perhaps Larry Albo's fingers will grow back because you *didn't mean for that to happen*." Without raising it, Dean Grimm's voice became a whip. Her words lashed Alexandra more severely than she'd lashed her hands in sixth grade.

"I had a plan -" Alexandra said.

"A plan. A plan to lure an abomination into the tunnels, where you would open a gate that you of all people should want to remain closed forever, using magic you barely understand and certainly can't control. *You had no idea what you were doing!* Do you really believe that if things had gone according to your 'plan' that there would have been no danger to anyone else, no collateral effects?"

Alexandra blinked rapidly and tried to steady her breathing. "What other choice did I have? You weren't doing anything to find that Nemesis Spirit -"

"Don't you dare tell me I wasn't doing anything!" Ms. Grimm did raise her voice now, and Alexandra shrank back in her chair. "We searched the woods. We cast more protective spells. We were making arrangements to protect you this summer when you returned to Larkin Mills. You weren't supposed to lure the creature to attack you! You foolish, foolish girl. Just because you can't see something happening doesn't mean no one is doing anything. Plans are made that are not shared with you."



Bitterness welled up, and Alexandra lashed back. "Well, that's nothing new. But I should share my plans with you."

She expected Ms. Grimm to become angrier, possibly even to finally afflict her with one of her long-threatened curses. Instead, her aunt sat back in her chair and looked very tired.

"The owls I've been receiving today are coming from all over Central Territory and beyond - including the Governor's office. Given your record, the conditions of your probation, the considerable leeway you have been allowed in the past, and the consequences of your actions... I'm sorry. I can't protect you this time, Alexandra." The Dean slowly swiveled her chair about to regard the paintings of former deans on the wall behind her. All of them looked on with expressions of great seriousness, as if they, too, were sharing in this judgment. She rotated back to face Alexandra. "I have no choice but to expel you from Charmbridge Academy."

Alexandra sat very still. Shock and indignation were her first reactions. This was followed by a leaden feeling in her throat that spread to the pit of her stomach. She curled her fingers, feeling the way the raw skin around her wrists still ached a bit when she moved her hands.

"Dean Grimm," said Miss Marmsley from the small picture frame on the Dean's desk, "your, er, other visitor is here."

"Thank you, Heather. A moment." Ms. Grimm rose from her seat and walked to the door. "Stay there, Miss Quick." She walked out of her office.

Alexandra sat still a moment, then she got up and walked to the desk and reached for the glass bowl containing Nigel.

"Young witch, the Dean told you to stay there," said one of the former deans hanging on the wall, a plump old man in mutton-chops, with a green wizard's hat that had long since lost its shape and hung limply over his forehead.

"Don't touch that!" said another elderly painted warlock. "Aren't you in enough trouble already?"

"What is Dean Grimm going to do, expel me?" Alexandra held up the glass bowl and looked at the brown snake inside. Nigel's tongue flickered against the glass.

She pulled off the mesh screen and reached her hand inside, picking the snake up gently as she always had. She held Nigel in her hands, and let him twine around her fingers. Nigel did not hiss or bare the fangs that she had never quite paid attention to. Her familiar was as peaceable as he ever was in her hands.

She kissed the snake's head. "Thank you for saving me, Nigel," she whispered.

Nigel's tongue flicked the air indifferently.

The door behind her opened. "Miss Quick," the Dean said, in a tone of mixed outrage and dismay.

Alexandra turned to face her with a defiant expression, but her defiance melted when she saw the man behind Ms. Grimm. "Mr. Tsotsie?"

Ms. Grimm took several careful steps into the room, eyeing the snake in Alexandra's hands, and Henry Tsotsie followed. The Navajo was wearing a red Auror's vest beneath a dark wizard's robe, something Alexandra had never seen any Indians wear back in Dinétah. Underneath the robes, though, he was wearing jeans and the same dusty Western boots he'd had on when she last saw him.

"Auror Tsotsie came here to collect the body of John Manuelito," Ms. Grimm said.

"The body?" Alexandra was conscious of Nigel twisting about in her hand, but she didn't look at the snake, still could not consider her familiar a threat.

"He was one of ours," Tsotsie said.

"I read that Navajos are afraid of dead bodies," Alexandra said. "Because of Chindi."

"You read that, huh?" Tsotsie's eyes were nearly as stone-like as Ms. Grimm's, but Alexandra realized that whereas Ms. Grimm's cold, implacable expression masked what she didn't want to show, Henry

Tsotsie was showing his true face. At least the truest face he'd show any *belagana*.

"In the case of an 'ǀnt'ǀjhnii, a Chindi is a real possibility," he said. "We'll perform the necessary ceremonies to ensure that John Manuelito's Chindi does not come back, and then I'll have to spend a long time being purified. This is not a pleasant duty."

Alexandra wasn't sure what to say to that. Then she thought of all the students down in the infirmary, and the ceremony in the sweat lodge back in Dinǀtah. "Mr. Tsotsie, can you help the people who were struck with ghost sickness?"

"I'm sure Charmbridge Academy can call on the best Healers around."

"Not for this. Healers don't even believe in Chindi. But I know your people can cure ghost sickness."

Tsotsie shrugged. "I'm just an Auror from the Indian Territories. I came here to collect a dead man and see that his Chindi does no more harm."

"There are a lot of kids sick, Mr. Tsotsie," Alexandra said. "They were made sick because of John Manuelito. You said he was one of yours."

The Auror said nothing, for such a long time that it was Ms. Grimm who spoke up next. "If you could give any relief to our children, Mr. Tsotsie, I would be extremely grateful, and I assure I would make sure proper credit is given -"

"You think I care about the gratitude of all those Colonial parents?" There was no scorn or meanness in Tsotsie's voice, just flat dismissal.

"I think you care about people who've been hurt by witchery," Alexandra said. "You're a sheepdog."

Tsotsie ran a hand slowly down his sleeve. "I'll call Billi Tewawina. She could bring a couple of medicine singers up." He glanced at Ms. Grimm. "Charmbridge Academy allows 'non-standard magical traditions'?"

"I am Dean here," Ms. Grimm said. "It will not be a problem. Thank you, Mr. Tsotsie."

Tsotsie nodded minutely.

"Miss Quick, put the snake back in the bowl," said the Dean.

Reluctantly, Alexandra did so. Nigel had lain quiescent in her hand during the entire conversation, but twisted a bit as she set him back inside the glass bowl on the Dean's desk.

Tsotsie said, "Dean Grimm told me about your 'familiar,' and your problem. I'll make a proposal to you. I'll take your Nigel." The Auror patted the small bulge beneath his robes where Alexandra knew he carried a leather satchel. "There's room enough in here for two snakes."

Alexandra looked from the snake to the wizard. "You'll take care of him?"

Tsotsie nodded.

Alexandra swallowed. "Thank you."

The Auror walked to the Dean's desk. He showed no great interest in the office or the furnishings or the men and women studying him curiously from the wall. He picked up the bowl, lifted his robes to reveal the leather pouch on his belt, opened it, and paused a moment as Nigel hissed. Then he tilted the bowl, and Nigel fell into the dark interior of Henry Tsotsie's leather pouch.

"He says you're welcome," Tsotsie said, as he closed the pouch. He set the empty bowl back on the desk and straightened his robes. Then he turned and gave Ms. Grimm a nod before exiting her office.

Alexandra had been planning to tell Ms. Grimm about what John told her. Someone else had been trying to kill her, all these months. Before, she'd hoped she could reason with her aunt and explain Mary Dearborn's involvement without getting her expelled.

Now, she knew that was hopeless. What good could she do by dragging Mary down with her as well? She kept her mouth shut and returned to her room to get her belongings.

---

Dean Grimm didn't say good-bye to her, nor was Alexandra given time to do much more than pack her things and meet Ms. Fletcher in front of the school. Anna followed her out, of course, tearfully swearing that her father would make Dean Grimm change her mind. By the time they got to the entrance, everyone had heard the news, and Alexandra was seen off by a solemn crowd: Anna, the Pritchards, David, and several members of the JROC, though not Torvald or Stuart.

Even David hugged her as he said, "This is bullshit."

"Yeah. Take care, dork. Don't get yourself in trouble." Alexandra patted him on the back.

"We'll talk as soon as I'm back in Detroit," he said.

"Oh Alexandra, we will miss you," Sonja said. Alexandra allowed her to hug her too.

Constance took her hands, and then Forbearance.

"This hain't good-bye," said Constance.

"Not for good," said Forbearance.

"I know," Alexandra said.

Innocence was wiping her eyes. She had been alternately bursting into tears and raging at the indignity of Alexandra's expulsion all the way down the stairs and out the door. Alexandra told her, "Don't get in trouble, Innocence. Not on my account."

"It hain't fair!" Innocence said, for probably the seventh time. She stamped her foot this time for emphasis.

"Maybe not," Alexandra said, no longer able to share Innocence's outrage. "But you can't do anything about it."

"Not here," Forbearance said, and laid a hand on Innocence's shoulder. Innocence quieted and blinked away tears.

Constance and Forbearance hugged Alexandra together. Constance whispered, "You 'member what we'uns told you, 'bout the Grannies?"

"I really don't know how I'm going to get to the Ozarks," Alexandra said. "Running away will be even harder without a wand."

"Din't say nothin' 'bout runnin' away, Alexandra Quick." Constance shook her head while Forbearance tsked. "We done told you, it's a Jubilee year. You is all invited to the Five Hollers."

"Really? All of us?" David asked.

"Din't we'uns just say *all*?" Constance said.

"I don't think my father will let me," Anna said. She was crying as much as Innocence, though less loudly. Alexandra pulled away from the Pritchards and put her arms around Anna to hug her tightly.

"Don't forget phone and email," she murmured. "It's going to be a long summer without you guys."

Charlotte Barker and Ermanno DiSilvio shook her hand. "Keep in practice," Ermanno said.

"Sure," Alexandra said, thinking, *That'll be tough without a wand, too.*

"I really wish you were going to be here next year to compete," Charlotte said.

"Thanks." Alexandra thought of her last sight of Larry, after the Nemesis Spirit had stabbed him in the stomach with its bloody, pointed beak. Any enthusiasm she once had for trouncing Larry Albo was gone now. "Take care of William, okay?" She looked at Innocence. "You, too."

She waved to everyone as she followed Ms. Fletcher through the woods. She kept an unconcerned expression on her face all the way to the bus, and then sat stone-faced for the entire ride home.

So, sent packing, literally, hurried out of the school in disgrace. An end to her wizarding career. She didn't even have a wand.

When they came to a stop in front of 207 Sweetmaple Avenue, Alexandra walked up the aisle of the bus, which felt eerie when she was the only passenger in its spacious interior. Would she really never again ride this bus filled with other Charmbridge students, exchanging taunts with Torvald and Stuart, Larry Albo and Benjamin

and Mordecai Rash, sitting at a table playing games with her friends?

Mrs. Speaks sounded sympathetic as she said, "Good-bye, Miss Quick. Best of luck to you."

"Thank you." Alexandra got off the bus and walked to her front door.

Claudia met her there. Alexandra didn't know how the Dean had informed her, but her sister had been told, somehow.

The two of them stood there facing each other, Alexandra with bandages over her nose and cheeks and wrapped around her wrists, looking like she'd been worked over in a fight.

"I got expelled," Alexandra said, and the tears started. She couldn't stop them.

"I know," Claudia said. She took Alexandra in her arms and held her as if she were her daughter, while Alexandra cried on her shoulder.

---

Alexandra sat in her room that night, listening to the Wizard Wireless. At least she'd been allowed to bring all of her magical possessions home - though she wasn't sure how long she'd be allowed to keep them. Would an Auror - or worse, an Obliviator - show up tomorrow and tell her that she had to live like one of the Wandless from now on?

She had never realized how much she would miss the wizarding world until she'd been kicked out of it.

The *Wyld Hunt* concert broadcast from Yellowknife was interrupted by news from Louisiana Territory. Alexandra listened with growing dismay as a Confederation News Network spokeswizard described with tones of shock and horror that didn't quite conceal his melodramatic glee the destruction of Baleswood, the elite wizarding school located deep in the swamps near New Orleans.

" - although the Dark Convention is certainly involved, already the name of one Dark Wizard in particular is being whispered, the Enemy of the Confederation. Last year's destruction of the New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards was evidently only

the first in the Enemy's latest plan to sow terror and chaos throughout the Confederation, a plan that Governor-General Hucksteen vows will not succeed. The Governor-General has announced the formation of -"

Alexandra's first impression was that the swamp had simply swallowed Baleswood all at once, causing it and everyone inside to disappear without a trace, but as she listened past the announcer's breathless hyperbole, she learned that the process had in fact begun slowly, proceeding inexorably over a period of several hours despite the best efforts of the school's faculty and wizards from New Orleans to stop it. By the time Baleswood actually disappeared beneath the water, the students and staff had been evacuated - though there were a few missing.

She thought about Angelique Devereaux, who had withdrawn from Charmbridge Academy to get away from her and her father. Now Abraham Thorn had struck directly at the place where Angelique had taken refuge, and Alexandra could only hope she was not one of the missing.

*Father, what are you doing?*

Anna's first letter arrived the next day, sent before the news about Baleswood had reached her. It was delivered by a Confederation Post owl because Anna had sent Jingwei to take a letter to her father.

Alexandra knew Mr. Chu wouldn't be able to make Dean Grimm change her mind even if he wanted to, and she couldn't imagine that the Congressman would think it was a good idea to try to use his office to help the daughter of the Enemy of the Confederation, especially now. She said as much to Anna in her reply, hoping Anna would see sense, or at least not be too angry at her father when he said 'No.' The last thing Alexandra wanted was for Anna to feel divided loyalties, or to get in trouble on account of her.

She sent Julia an owl also. Julia would be taking her SPAWNs at the Salem Witches' Institute now, like Alexandra's friends at Charmbridge. She hoped she would get to see Julia this summer as Ms. King had promised. She didn't think the Kings would shun her even if she were disgraced and wandless, but she couldn't help being worried while waiting for her sister's reply.



She didn't know what she was supposed to do now. Would she ever be allowed to have a wand again? Was there a day school somewhere she could attend? Claudia didn't know. Claudia had asked Livia for help.

While her sisters dithered over what to do, Alexandra decided she would have to start making her own plans.

The first day that Claudia and Archie were both at work, Alexandra bundled up her Seven-League Boots, her books and potions, her Skyhook, and all the remaining artifacts she still had from the Lands Below, stuffed them into the bottom of her magical backpack, and headed for Third Street. Her broom she left behind in her closet. If they came for her and her remaining magical items, the broom was something they already knew about.

The Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse looked as it had in January, still a spooky, abandoned building ignored by everyone who passed by it. Alexandra took a moment to clear her head, and the broken windows, graffiti, and debris fell away, along with the barbed wire fence, leaving only an old, abandoned but intact building before her.

She was relieved that she could still see through the Muggle-Repelling Charms. Even without a wand, she was still a witch.

The old, rusted metal door creaked as she entered the building. It was still full of old storage bays and pallets and offices, mostly dark even with sunlight coming in through the windows. She paused when she reached a dried brown stain on the floor. If she had had her wand, she would have scoured it away.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone here?"

Livia had said she was going to do something with the property, but it didn't look like she'd done anything yet. Alexandra didn't know if the Dark Convention would have replaced Martha and resumed using the warehouse for its own purposes, but if there was another hag here, she would just have to deal with her.

She walked up the stairs to the second floor, where the corridors had no exposure to windows and it was pitch dark. She opened the stairwell doors and tried to switch on her flashlight. It didn't work, and she cursed.

"Goody Pruett?" she called, as she took out a box of matches instead. She was going to have to acquire a lantern.

A dry, brittle voice replied, "Who is that?"

Alexandra lit a match and approached the end of the corridor.

"It's me," she said. "Alexandra Quick. Has anyone been here since I was here last?" The match flame cast enough light for her to see the old woman, flickering shadows playing over paint.

"Only a rude young man who called himself a Cursebreaker," Goody Pruett said. "He barely said a word to me."

"So no hag has come to replace Martha?"

"Certainly not! Livia promised me no more loathsome creatures like that would trespass here."

"And the offices back there where Martha used to store things?"

The portrait sniffed. "I don't know."

Alexandra's match had almost burned down to her fingertips. She dropped it, lit another, and proceeded down the corridor.

"Wait, where are you going?" Goody Pruett asked.

The offices were dusty and abandoned, containing old furniture and mouse droppings and little else. Alexandra wandered from room to room, holding matches up to look into every corner and examining spaces under desks and inside filing cabinets. It had been emptied. It did not seem that the Dark Convention or anyone else was still using this place.

One more match burned out. Standing in the middle of a dark room, Alexandra listened, and let the feel of magic brush against her.

She put everything from her backpack into an old wooden filing cabinet, then returned to the portrait of her sister's ancestor, holding up another match.

Goody Pruett had become plaintive while Alexandra left her alone in the dark. "Livia promised I wouldn't be left alone here forever."

"Don't worry," Alexandra said. "I'll be back."

She walked upstairs to the third floor. The open space dominating half the floor, which she had used as her private training studio, remained empty, with the burns and scars and split wood still visible. She walked to one of the windows and opened it, and Charlie flew in.

"Hagar," said Charlie.

Alexandra cast her eyes about the property below and the sky overhead. She saw no other raven, but suddenly felt a faint breeze against the back of her neck.

"I know you know how to call my cell phone," she said, without turning around. "You don't have to sneak around to talk to me."

"Do you not prefer to speak to me in person?" her father asked.

She turned. Abraham Thorn wore his usual dark robes and cloak. He was alone. There was no sign of either Hagar or Medea. Something passed across his stern countenance when he saw her face, still bandaged. Alexandra said nothing as he stepped closer to her, but when he reached a hand out to touch his fingertips to her chin, she spoke.

"What will we talk about this time?" she asked. "How I got expelled from Charmbridge Academy? How you destroyed Baleswood? Whether or not this place is still being used by the Dark Convention? Or maybe we should talk about the Stars Above."

Her father lowered his hand slowly. "Yes, we should talk about all of those things. Your expulsion was unfortunate, but Lilith Grimm really didn't have a choice. There are other options, however."

"Like what? Joining you? Enrolling in the Salem Witches' Institute? I hope you'll let Julia graduate before you destroy that school, too. *What are you doing?*"

"We can't discuss this if you're going to be loud and irrational," her father said.

"I am not irrational, I'm angry! One of my friends goes to Baleswood!"

"All of the Confederation's schools are built upon places that the Confederation uses to access the Lands Below, and other realms," he said. "Where do you think the Deathly Regiment originated?"

"You think you can destroy every gate to the Lands Below and that will steal the Confederation's power?"

"Something like that. Alexandra, where is the token I gave you?"

She opened her hands, as if to demonstrate that she didn't have it. "In the Lands Below."

"What?" It was rare to see Abraham Thorn taken aback, and equally rare for Alexandra to know something he didn't.

She savored the moment for only a second, because there really wasn't any triumph in it. "I used it to send the Nemesis Spirit to the Lands Below - without me."

He sucked in a breath. "That is not what it was supposed to be used for."

"Maybe you should have told me what it was supposed to be used for. I'm so sorry I had to save myself. But you didn't exactly come to my rescue when I needed you - just like you didn't come to my rescue when John Manuelito tried to kill me."

Thorn's face twitched. "I regret that I did not. You were supposed to be safe at Charmbridge. If you had waited -"

"Waited for what? Waited for the adults to do something? Waited for someone else to get killed, maybe one of my friends? What are you saying, that everything is my fault? Well, maybe it is, but if you didn't expect me to do something myself, then you really don't know me very well, do you?"

Her father's face showed his slowly losing battle with his temper. Alexandra could tell that she was pushing the limits of his patience again.

"What was I born for?" she asked.

For the second time, Abraham Thorn was caught by surprise. "Excuse me?"

"What was I born for? John said that the Dark Convention believes I was supposed to be sacrificed to destroy the Confederation."

"You believe the ravings of a journeyman warlock like John Manuelito?"

"The Stars Above said you knew before I was born that you were going to refuse them, or something like that." Alexandra watched as her father's eyes slid away from hers. "There was some kind of prophecy, wasn't there?" He didn't answer. "Did it say I'm supposed to die?"

He looked back at her. "Prophecies don't dictate actions, Alexandra. Only results. No prophecy can make you or I or anyone else do anything."

"But they do come true, don't they?"

Abraham Thorn was silent.

"Did you think I'd be better off if you just didn't tell me?"

"Yes, Alexandra, I thought that. I still think that - if you allow yourself to believe you're doomed, you will be. But we will find a way. I defied the Dark Convention, my child. I defy the very Stars Above, because I refuse to surrender to any preordained fate."

His face was half-lit by a sunbeam shining through a window, and the rest of him was captured in shadows surrounded by dust swirling in the sunlight. Alexandra heard his words and believed him - almost. But it wasn't enough to release her anger or unclench the knot of distrust in her stomach.

"I've been thinking a lot," she said. "I told you last time that I didn't want to be lied to anymore. I said I wanted you to teach me something, and I've asked you to be more involved in my life if you want to be my father. And you know what? You really suck at both. You only tell me what you think I need to know, and you only visit me once in a while, usually after something bad happens. And I've decided that I don't want anything to do with you or your plans. I don't want anything from you. As long as you're killing people and terrorizing the Confederation, you're threatening my friends and family - *your* family - and I just don't trust you. Everything you do has some hidden motive. Maybe you really do have my best interests at

heart and I'm just too young and naive to understand, but from what I can see, all you've done is make your children suffer. If destroying the Confederation and getting revenge on Governor-General Hucksteen is the most important thing in the world to you, then you'd better go do that. Maybe you can be a father when you're done."

When she had rehearsed this speech in her head, she delivered it with dignity and conviction that would mortally wound Abraham Thorn with her righteous indignation. But actually saying the words, she stammered over them, didn't feel she was at all as clear or certain as she had been in her imagination, and when her father merely stood quietly without reaction, except for a certain sadness in his eyes, she didn't feel triumphant or vindicated, only empty and alone.

Deep down, she wanted her father to choose her and her sisters over his ambitions and his vengeance. And deep down, she knew he never would.

"You told me you wanted me to teach you to become great," he said.

"And you told me no one can teach me that."

"You have no wand now."

"I'll get one." She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I don't want your wands and brooms and artifacts." She held up the CBNW bank book he had given her. "You can take this back if you want."

"No." Abraham Thorn shook his head, and drew his cloak around him. "I will not take back anything I have given you. If this is how you feel, daughter, I will respect your wishes, but I am still your father and you cannot dismiss me so easily."

There was a long pause. Alexandra was conscious of wanting to say something, and wanting her father to say something, and knowing that he felt the same way.

"Someone is still trying to kill me," she said. "It wasn't just John Manuelito."

She wouldn't ask her father for protection for herself, but she worried about Claudia, especially now that she had no wand.

"I know," he said. "But I will allow no harm to come to my daughters."

Alexandra held her tongue.

Abraham Thorn disappeared, not with a pop, but with a silent gust of wind, as if he had been dismissed and dissolved into the air.

Alexandra sat down in the center of the warehouse floor, rested her elbows on her knees, and buried her face in her hands. She didn't cry, but she felt as empty and exhausted as if she'd been crying for hours. She heard Charlie hopping across the wooden floor a few feet from her.

"Alexandra," said the raven.

She took her hands away from her face and reached for her familiar.

"Charlie," she said. The raven perched on her arm - not on her wrist, where the skin was still red and bruised, but higher on her forearm. "I think we could set up a pretty nice roost for you here. We're going to be spending more time here."

"Charlie," Charlie repeated.

"Fly away home now," she said, giving the raven a little toss. Charlie flapped to the window and took off though it. Alexandra got up to close the window, looked around one more time, and went downstairs and exited the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse.

Taking the shortcut across the park on the way home, she saw two people sitting on the very same park bench where her fight with Billy Boggleston had begun last summer. There were kids and adults all over the park - it was a hot summer day - but Billy was nowhere in sight. It was just Brian and Bonnie Seabury.

"Hi, Alex," Bonnie said.

"Hi," Alexandra said. It was the first time she'd seen the younger girl since the night after her accident, in the hospital. "You're looking pretty good."

"Better than you," Bonnie said, eyes wide at the sight of Alexandra's bruised and bandaged nose and face.

Brian had half-risen from his seat. "What happened to you?"

"It's a long story. Don't worry, I'm fine." Alexandra was uncomfortable with Brian's show of concern, so she asked Bonnie, "How are you doing?"

Bonnie said, "I still have a limp, and I have to see a physical therapist once a week, but Mom finally let me leave the house with Brian." She added the last part with disdain, as if Brian's presence was completely unnecessary and undesirable, though all they were doing was sitting on a park bench eating ice cream.

"So are you back for the summer?" Brian asked.

"Yeah," Alexandra said. *Maybe longer.*

Bonnie grinned. "Do you two want to *talk*?" She said the word 'talk' with teasing emphasis. Brian made a fake swipe at her with the back of his hand, and she stuck an ice-cream coated tongue out at him.

"I'm stuck with her. Mom'll kill me if I let her out of my sight," Brian said.

"So annoying," Bonnie said. "It's not like I can't go to the park and back by myself."

"Don't get yourself in trouble, Bonnie," Alexandra said. She gave Brian a half-smile. "Well, see you later." She stuck her hands in her pockets and continued on toward Sweetmaple Avenue.

"Alex, wait." Brian stood up, and pointed at Bonnie. "You stay there. I mean it." Bonnie rolled her eyes, but didn't move.

Brian walked over to Alexandra, and gestured at the ice cream cart, where young children and teenagers alike were thronging about. "Can I buy you an ice cream?"

"Buy me an ice cream?" She started to tell him she could buy herself an ice cream, but there was something at once anxious and hopeful in his expression, as if an ice cream represented something much more.

She really didn't make it easy on those who tried to get close to her, she thought. She knew she was hard on her friends. Had she treated Payton unfairly, and Torvald, and her father? Perhaps even



Claudia and Archie? Self-doubt and bittersweet memories swept over her all at once.

She had no idea what her future held. But summer in Larkin Mills could be lonely without friends.

"Okay," she said.

They walked over to the ice cream cart. Alexandra slipped an arm around Brian's. Surprised, he gave her a little smile. Overhead, a raven cawed raucously, and Alexandra smiled back.

### ***End Year Four***

**Author's Note:** I hope you have enjoyed the fourth book in the *Alexandra Quick* series. Thank you to everyone who read it, and especially to those who have left reviews. I really appreciate them, and hope you'll consider leaving one now, even if you aren't a regular reviewer. I won't be writing book five immediately, but I have begun outlining it, and rest assured, the *Alexandra Quick* series will continue. If you would like to stay updated, please visit my LiveJournal, where I will soon post a lengthier Author's Notes for AQATSA, and where I will keep fans posted on my progress with book five: **AQATWA**.